

BIGGLES AND THE GUN RUNNERS

**Captain
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‘The great thing in life is to keep your sense of humour,’ says Biggles, though getting his Constellation shot down over southern Sudan by a trigger-happy fighter pilot of the Congolese Air Force was no laughing matter. In fact, his privations and those of his co-pilot, Sandy Grant, increased from that very moment in an affair which throughout bristled with spies, lies and deception.

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CHAPTER 1

THREE MEN IN A BOG

From the second pilot's seat of a four-engined Lockheed 'Constellation' aircraft, wearing radio telephone equipment, Biggles of the Air Police, from a height of 14,000 ft gazed down through a quivering heat-haze at the apparently eternal panorama of Central Africa. To be precise, the Southern Sudan in the region of the White Nile.

Beside him, in control of the machine, sat a smallish, sandy-haired man whose puckish but intelligent face was plentifully besprinkled with freckles.

'Listen, Sandy. They're still ordering us down,' said Biggles.

'Who's doing the ordering?'

'I don't know. They don't say and I haven't asked them. You told me to ignore all signals.'

'Okay. You can tell 'em to go to hell.'

'I wouldn't take that line. They might decide to send us there.'

'How do they reckon they're going to do that?'

'I wouldn't know, but from the way they talk they seem sure they've got the edge of us. They say they've given us fair warning. If we go on we shall have to be prepared to take the consequences.'

'What do you take that to mean?'

'How would I know? But I have a feeling they wouldn't use that sort of threat unless they were in a position to —'

'Pah! They're bluffing.'

'I wouldn't gamble on that,' Biggles said, looking worried.

'You scared?' There was a hint of good-humoured sneer in the words.

'You can call it that,' returned Biggles, coldly. 'I've been shot at before today, and the older I get the less I like it.'

'If you don't like the way I fly you can get out.'

'Now you're talking like a fool, Sandy.'

'Okay, so I'm a fool. What would *you* do?'

'Answer their signals. They must know we're receiving them.'

'Then what? They'd only repeat the order to go down.'

'I'd go down to find out what all the fuss was about. We should have done that while we still had an airfield in easy range. We've nothing to be afraid of, so why not?'

'I'm staying here. Let 'em sweat,' was the curt rejoinder.

'But for Pete's sake, Sandy, why take that attitude?' protested Biggles.

'We're not carrying contraband, or any nonsense of that sort. In fact, we're flying empty except for ourselves.'

'Listen, pal. If they get us on the ground they may hold us for days, or maybe weeks, asking a lot of questions about where we're going, what we're

doing, and why we've no passengers. To hell with that.'

'Is there any reason why we shouldn't tell them?'

'We've no time to waste. I'm in charge of this ship and I'm going on.'

Biggles shrugged. 'Have it your way. I can only hope you realize we're asking for trouble. If they should get their hands on us after this we're likely to get rough treatment.'

'The Sudd's in front of us. You keep your eyes skinned for the machine we're looking for. Our orders were clear enough. Get down beside the ship before anyone finds it, transfer the cargo and bring it home with the pilots.'

'Why bring it home?'

'There may be a good reason. Like I say, I obey orders without asking questions.'

'I'm as conscientious about obeying orders as you are, but I like to know what I'm doing. Whoever gave you orders to land in the Sudd was talking through his hat. He obviously doesn't know the Sudd. At this time of the year, until the sun dries it out, it'll be swamp, four hundred miles of water, mud and rushes; and nothing else except elephants. If that machine is down in the Sudd it's ten to one she'll be up to her belly either in mud or water.'

'Quit stalling. We'll find somewhere to get down. Are they still yapping on the radio?'

'No. They've stopped.'

'That's what I thought they'd do when they realized how we felt about it.'

'I admire your confidence and I hope you're right; but I wouldn't care to bet on it,' returned Biggles. He went on: 'Okay. So we find the lost machine, and if we're lucky get down in one piece. Then what?'

'All we have to do is transfer the cargo.'

'What does the cargo consist of?'

'I don't know.'

'I imagine it will be heavy.'

'It usually is.'

'If we have to carry it far in this heat we shall have to pray for strength.'

'There'll be four of us.'

'Say three.'

'Why three?'

'We shall only find one man with the machine. What you appear to have overlooked is that one of them would have to go off to find a post office to send the telegram to say the machine was down in the Sudd. The place isn't exactly bristling with post offices. Whoever went might have to go as far as Juba or Malakal. That depends on where it came down. Why did it have to come down, anyway?'

'Search me.'

'Didn't the telegram say anything about engine trouble, or structural failure...'

'I didn't see the telegram. All I was told was, the machine was down in the

Sudd and we were to go to fetch the stuff home. I don't think the boss knew more than that himself. He seemed pretty fed up.'

'So, for all we know the machine may have crashed?'

'I suppose so.'

'And we don't know at which end of the Sudd it came down. Four hundred miles is a long stretch to search and we may have a job to find it. What was it doing over the Sudd, which most pilots would agree is a good place to keep clear of? Where was it bound for?'

'Carisville.'

'Where's that?'

'Northern Congo.'

Biggles stared. 'Then what was it doing over the Sudd?'

'That's the way we usually go. Across the Mediterranean, down the Sinai Peninsula and then follow the Nile to the White Nile.'

'But that would land you miles east of the Congo?'

'At the southern end of the Sudd we turn sharp west. From there it isn't too far to the north-east corner of the Congo, and the objective.'

'It seems a mighty queer business to me,' stated Biggles. 'Why make a dog's-leg of it?'

'The Count is on good terms with Egypt, so I think the idea is to keep in touch with one of the aerodromes there for emergencies — fuel, and so on.'

Biggles shook his head. 'I still don't get it. Had I been told more about the way things were run, before we started, I'd have been in a better position to judge just what we're doing and what might happen to us.'

'There's a lot about it I don't understand myself,' admitted Sandy. 'You're a new man. No doubt the boss would have told you more in course of time, after he'd seen how you made out.'

'You've no idea who would be likely to order us down?'

'No, and I don't care. I'm not taking orders from strangers. I'm captain of this ship and I'm not going home to report I was scared to go through with the job on account of some interfering rascal. Right now I can't see any place to get down even if I wanted to. You watch the carpet for the Constellation we're looking for; it's big enough to see.'

There was a pause in the conversation. Then Biggles said: 'That's a nice herd of elephants ahead. The Sudd is about their last stronghold. Even poachers think twice about hunting here. When the last wild African elephant dies it will probably be in this area.'

'So what? What the hell do elephants matter, anyhow? That looks like smoke farther on. Might be coming from the Constellation, to mark its position for a relief plane.'

'Could be,' agreed Biggles. 'I can also see something else, something which may turn out to be more interesting. Look up, half right.'

Sandy's eyes moved. 'A plane. Fighter type. What the devil can he be doing here?'

‘Since you ask, it occurs to me that it might be looking for us. In fact, from the way he has just altered course towards us, I’d say he’s spotted us. As you remarked just now, a Constellation is big enough to see.’

‘He’s only coming over to have a look at us,’ said Sandy, carelessly.

‘Maybe. We shall soon know what he’s after. It doesn’t appear to have struck you that this fellow may have been responsible for putting the other Constellation on the floor.’

Sandy laughed. ‘Oh, come off it. He wouldn’t dare.’

‘We’re not in Europe,’ reminded Biggles, his eyes on the fast approaching aircraft, obviously a military single-seater. ‘He’s coming close. Watch out.’

Biggles’ voice ended on a high note, and both pilots in the big machine flinched instinctively as the fighter flashed across their bows.

‘What the blazes does he think he’s doing?’ shouted Sandy, furiously.

‘At present I’d say he’s only buzzing us, inviting us to comply with orders to land. If we take no notice he may show us his sting. Did you get his nationality marks?’

‘I only noticed something red and black. Maybe one of these new independent African states. Where is the little swine?’

‘He’s turned and is coming in behind us. What are you going to do?’

‘Do? Nothing. Why should I do anything?’

‘Listen, Sandy,’ said Biggles tersely. ‘This fellow must be attached to the ground organization that ordered us down. Now we know what they meant about taking the consequences if we carried on.’

‘I’m not going to be pushed into the ground by that little squirt,’ declared Sandy obstinately.

‘You may change your mind about that,’ returned Biggles evenly. ‘We can’t fight. We’ve nothing to fight with. If you can’t fight it’s time to run away. He’s coming in on the starboard quarter. Hold your hat. He means business.’

Above the roar of the four Cyclone engines now came the snarl of multiple machine-guns. Lines of white tracer bullets flashed across the Constellation’s nose.

‘Missed us,’ snapped Sandy laconically.

‘He didn’t try to hit us. Had he tried he could hardly have missed. I’d say that was the final warning.’

Before Sandy could answer the Constellation quivered like a startled horse as it was struck by whip lashes somewhere astern.

Biggles looked at his companion who, pale faced, was staring at him wide-eyed. ‘Well, now what are you going to do?’ he asked calmly.

‘He hit us, blast him.’

‘Of course. He could hardly miss this flying pantechinon.’ Biggles went on, now deadly earnest. ‘It’s no use, Sandy. We’re a sitting duck. We can’t hit back. If he gets a tank we’re roast meat.’

‘I suppose I shall have to go down, curse him,’ grated Sandy through his

teeth.

‘If he keeps this up we shall be lucky to get down,’ stated Biggles grimly, as another hail of bullets struck the big Lockheed. One must have passed between them into the instrument panel, for a rev counter disappeared in a shower of splintered glass.

Sandy crouched lower in his seat, compressing himself into the smallest possible compass.

‘That won’t help you,’ said Biggles calmly. ‘Have you never been shot at before?’

‘Not in the air.’

‘Nasty feeling, isn’t it?’

Sandy did not answer.

‘Are you saying you’ve had no experience of air combat?’ went on Biggles.

‘Never.’

‘Then you’d better let me take over, because I have; and I know a trick or two.’

‘Okay. She’s all yours.’ Sandy’s face was white.

‘It’s not so bad when you get used to it,’ Biggles said calmly. ‘Don’t worry. Everyone gets butterflies inside first time. Hang on.’

‘D’you think you can make it?’ asked Sandy anxiously.

‘It depends on what experience this fellow has had. If, as I suspect from the way he’s flying, he’s young and green at the game, we may get away with it.’

A swift look at the sky revealed the fighter coming in for another attack. The Constellation’s engines died. Biggles slammed on full right rudder and dragged the control column far over to the left. The effect was a violent skid, jamming both pilots in their seats as the aircraft lay over on its side, port wing pointing at the ground in an almost vertical sideslip, the nose being held up by Biggles’ right foot on the rudder control.

‘What good’s this doing?’ shouted Sandy desperately.

‘Unless he’s an old hand and realizes what I’m doing, it should prevent him from hitting us.’

‘Why should it?’

‘My line of flight is down, but we look as if we’re still going forward. That’ll throw his deflection out. His shots will pass forward of us. See what I mean?’ Biggles added, as more white tracer streamed against the blue sky ahead of the Constellation’s bows.

The fighter flashed past in the wake of his bullets. As it began to pull out of its dive Biggles reversed the position of the Constellation, pointing his starboard wing down and holding it in control with left rudder. Brute force was necessary, as the big machine did not respond as quickly as a small aircraft would have done.

In the pause that followed Biggles snatched a glance at the altimeter and saw the needle, still falling, pass the 9,000-ft mark.

‘What’s the little swine doing?’ shouted Sandy.

‘Looking for us — I hope. He’d lose sight of us when he overshot. Watch the ground for elephants.’

‘Hell’s bells! Why elephants?’

‘Because they’ll be on dry ground, if there is any. Somehow I’ve got to get this lumbering truck on the carpet.’

By now the fighter must have found them, for they heard its guns. But they saw no bullets. None struck them.

‘He still isn’t wise to it,’ muttered Biggles. ‘We haven’t much farther to go.’

Sandy threw him a sidelong glance. ‘You’ve done this before.’

‘Too true, but not in a kite this size. My arm’s numb, holding her in this position. Try to spot that infernal sting-ray when I pull out. He’ll get a chance when I flatten out.’

‘I can see elephants.’

‘Where?’

‘Straight ahead.’

‘Any trees?’

‘No. Nothing.’

‘Good. Hold on to something. Don’t fall on me.’

Centralizing the controls, Biggles brought the big machine back slowly to even keel. The pressure relaxed.

‘Where is he?’ he asked.

‘Sitting right over us.’

‘Watching to make sure we don’t try to pull a fast one.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Land. Or try to.’

‘Why not go on?’

‘Not me. I’ve had enough. We’ve been lucky — so far. I’m not tempting providence.’

‘The boss will say—’

‘Never mind the boss. If he was on board he wouldn’t be able to get out fast enough.’

‘That little swine will get us as you glide in.’

‘He won’t. We’re too low now. If he dives and overshoots us he’ll be into the deck. Hold tight. We’re liable to do some bumping when our wheels touch. Don’t talk. I’m trying to get on the ground in one piece.’

Biggles now concentrated on the task of landing the big machine in conditions far from ideal. There was only one area of clear ground, the place where the elephants, a big herd, were now looking up at them. Judging from their tracks the ground looked reasonably firm.

Biggles opened up his engines and flew low straight at them. This sent them off in a stampede, trunks held high. Only one, an old bull by the size of his tusks, held his ground; but as Biggles made a circuit to get the longest

possible run in, he, too, lost his nerve and bolted.

The engines died. Slowly the Constellation lost height. For a little way it skimmed the feathery heads of tall papyrus rushes. These gave way to rough tussocky grass dotted with clumps of scrub, some uprooted by the elephants. The wheels touched; bumped; touched again and bumped again; then, touching again, they remained on the ground. The machine, jolting and swaying a little, rumbled on to a stop.

‘Pretty good,’ panted Sandy, breathing hard.

‘Get out.’

‘What’s the hurry?’

‘The lad upstairs may have a last smack at us.’

They scrambled out in a hurry and looked up. The fighter was gliding in.

‘He’s going to land,’ observed Biggles.

‘Land, eh! He’s got a crust — after shooting at us,’ rasped Sandy. He snatched an automatic from his pocket.

‘What are you going to do with that?’ inquired Biggles.

‘Shoot the little swine.’

‘Put it away,’ Biggles said impatiently.

‘He shot at us, didn’t he?’

‘So what. Use your head, man. What good will shooting him do us? He was doing his job; sent up by someone to stop us. Let him talk and we may learn what all this is about.’

Muttering under his breath, Sandy replaced the pistol in his pocket. They watched their attacker land.

‘What machine is that?’ asked Sandy.

‘Never saw one before.’

‘What are those markings?’

‘I don’t know that, either. They’re new to me. With new states popping up all over the world it’s hard to keep pace.’

The pilot of the aircraft concerned, a dapper figure in uniform, got down and walked briskly towards them. His face was black.

Sandy made a noise as if he was choking. ‘No,’ he cried. ‘A Negro! It isn’t true!’

‘I can’t see that the colour of his skin makes any difference,’ said Biggles, without emotion. ‘It doesn’t affect his guns.’

‘He had the sauce to shoot at us.’

‘It’s the finger on the gun button that counts. Who it belongs to doesn’t matter.’

‘Doesn’t it? I’ll knock his flaming block off.’

‘You’re talking like a twit. You go off at the deep end and you may find your own block knocked off. Let’s hear what he has to say.’

The coloured pilot marched up with the greatest confidence. But there was nothing arrogant in his manner. He was young. Under twenty. He wore a revolver in a holster on his hip, but he did not draw it.

'You are arrested,' he announced, in the high-pitched nasal voice common to Africans.

'Indeed. For what, may I ask?' inquired Biggles.

'For supplying arms to the rebels in my country.'

'And what country is that?'

'Congo.'

'Are you Congolese?'

'I am an officer of the Congolese Air Force.'

'Then what are you doing here? This isn't the Congo.'

The officer looked taken aback. 'Isn't it?'

'It is not. This is Sudanese territory.'

'So I came over the border,' admitted the pilot, naively. 'Congo is close so it makes no difference.'

'Doesn't it, by thunder,' returned Biggles, crisply. 'You get the idea you can fly where you like, shooting at anyone you fancy, and you're heading for trouble. You'd better buy yourself a map.'

'You ignored signal to land.'

'What if I did? You can't order planes to land just to suit you.'

'We have information that more arms for rebels are expected.'

'Well, we haven't got them. You'd better start looking somewhere else.'

'I will look.' The Negro took a pace towards the Constellation.

Biggles' hand fell on his shoulder. 'No you don't. You'll ask my permission before you step into that plane.'

'May I look?'

'That's better. You're welcome to all the guns you can find.'

'Why argue with the little rat?' growled Sandy, as their questioner climbed into the machine. 'Knock him off and have done with it.'

'What an impatient fellow you are,' protested Biggles. 'He'll climb off the high horse when he realizes he's boobed.'

The black pilot returned looking crestfallen. 'I am sorry,' he said contritely.

'So you should be,' chided Biggles. 'That would have been small consolation to us had you set us on fire. As it is you've damaged our machine. What are you going to do about it?'

'What *can* I do? I say I am sorry.'

'You can go home and tell your commanding officer what you've done. He'll hear more about it.'

'I will do that. I am very sorry.'

'So you said before. All right. In future be more careful with those guns.'

'Is there anything I can do now?'

'Nothing. We'll be on our way when we're ready.'

'Then I go. If I can help you any time my name is Lieutenant I'Nobo. Good day, gentleman.' The Negro saluted and marched back to his machine.

As they watched him take off Biggles said, with a curious smile: 'He's all

right. He'll do better with more practice. At least he called us gentlemen, a word that's gone out of fashion where I come from.' He lit a cigarette. 'So now we know,' he added.

'Know what?'

'Someone is supplying arms to Congolese rebels. The Congo government is wise to it and they're putting up planes to stop the racket. We'd better remember that should we come this way again.'

'This is all the thanks you get for helping them to fill their bellies,' observed Sandy in a voice of disgust. 'You let him off light. Had I been alone —'

'You weren't, so why talk about it?'

'I know — I know,' muttered Sandy. 'You got the machine down after I'd lost my nerve. Don't rub it in. I'll buy you a drink when we get some place where they sell it. What do we do now?'

'When we've got our breath we'd better go on with what we were doing. How far do you reckon we are from that smoke we saw?'

'Some way. I lost track of it as we came down. I was thinking of something else.'

Biggles smiled. 'Matter of fact, so was I. No matter. We'll find it presently.' He sat on a tussock to finish his cigarette.

This seems to be the time to explain why Biggles was acting as second-pilot in a big commercial air-liner, flying without seats and without passengers over Central Africa. To understand how this unusual circumstance arose it is necessary to start at the beginning, in London.

CHAPTER 2

THE ONLY WAY

When, in answer to a call on the intercom telephone, Biggles of the Air Police entered the office of his chief, he found the Air Commodore hanging up his hat and coat.

‘Would I be right, sir, in supposing that something urgent is in the breeze?’ he questioned, quietly.

‘Not in the breeze, Bigglesworth,’ was the answer. ‘Not even a wind. Call it a force nine gale. Sit down. I’ve just come from a high level conference and I shall have to talk to you about it.’

Biggles took his usual chair for such occasions in front of the Air Commodore’s desk. He did not speak.

His chief settled in his own chair and with his eyes on Biggles’ face went on: ‘I’ll come straight to the point. I’ve been given orders to put an end to this gun-running by air racket.’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘Is that all?’

‘Isn’t it enough?’

‘Too much. What are you going to do?’

‘Stop it.’

Biggles’ smile became cynical. ‘Did the gentleman who gave you that order indicate how it was to be done?’

‘No.’

‘I’ll bet he didn’t. He didn’t because he couldn’t.’

The Air Commodore regarded Biggles reproachfully.

‘This is no time for levity, Bigglesworth. The matter is serious and urgent.’

‘I merely asked a question, sir. I could answer it myself.’

‘Very well. Do so.’

‘No suggestion was made as to how these gun-running planes were to be stopped because, you know as well as I do, there is no way short of shooting them down and if we did that it might start a blaze too big for us to put out. It’s no use ordering a pilot to land if he doesn’t want to. He can ignore signals on the pretext that his radio had developed a fault. It’s as simple as that.’

The Air Commodore pushed his cigarette box nearer to Biggles. ‘I hope you’re not going to be awkward.’

‘I’m old enough to have learned to face facts, sir. Looking at them sideways gets you nowhere. As far as aviation is concerned I think I can claim to recognize them when I see them.’

‘I have been told that we can go to any lengths to stop this dirty business.’

‘What exactly does that imply?’

‘I take it to mean we can employ any method we like as long as the desired result is achieved.’

‘And that includes the use of guns?’

‘I would say so.’

‘Have you got that in writing?’

‘Well — er — no.’

‘That’s what I thought. So it boils down to this. First I find a plane carrying guns and ammunition to natives who are chucking their weight about. I order it to land. It refuses. So I shoot it down. It may then be found that I have killed a perfectly innocent aviator. I should then be informed in no uncertain terms that I had exceeded my duties. In short, we take the rap. I don’t want a life sentence for murder. That’s what they would call it.’

The Air Commodore looked uncomfortable. ‘You exaggerate the difficulties. Obviously you wouldn’t shoot down a plane unless you knew for certain that it was carrying arms.’

‘And how do I find that out? The racketeers are not likely to advertise what they’re doing and where they’re going.’

‘That’s up to you. Before we go any further how much do you know about this business?’

‘Only what I’ve read in the papers.’

‘Then you may not realize what’s behind it all.’

‘I’ve got a pretty good idea.’

‘Gun-running isn’t what it used to be. Like everything else it has changed. It used to be done by individuals for private gain. It is now a continuation of the Cold War between the Communist states and the West. It has always gone on in spite of all that could be done to stop it. No one wanted to see warring native tribes exterminating each other. Given guns that’s what they were doing. Today, although he may not realize it, the poor ignorant native has become a pawn in power politics; and it’s going on all over the world.’

Biggles nodded. ‘It’s a rotten shame.’

The Air Commodore went on. ‘In the days before aeroplanes what happened was this. A European country would decide to re-equip its army with a more up-to-date type of rifle. This having been done the country concerned found itself with perhaps a hundred thousand obsolete weapons and ammunition to go with them. What could be done with all this stuff? There was no market for it in Europe, so it was sold off in job lots for anything it would fetch — rifles at a few shillings each. This was where unscrupulous traders stepped in. In what we call the undeveloped countries, where men still hunted for their food with bows and arrows, a rifle was worth its weight in gold. It was to these people that the unwanted arms of Europe went. Most civilized countries put an embargo on the sale of rifles and guns to natives in its own particular colonies, but that didn’t prevent a crooked tramp steamer captain from putting a load under his legitimate cargo. The stuff could be unloaded on some lonely stretch of coast where agents could pick it up and sell it for big money. This was how natives all over the world got their rifles — even Red Indians in America. The men who sold the rifles didn’t care what

they were used for, and animals weren't the only things shot. This is past history, and the Navy no longer has to search small craft in the Red Sea for hidden guns. Now this nasty business has come to life again, using modern methods and for a different purpose.'

'So I gather,' put in Biggles.

'The idea now is to cause as much trouble as possible in the ex-colonial countries which the United Nations Organization is trying to help as they get their independence. The weapons being handed out by the communists are no longer the antiquated stuff they used to be, but brand-new mortars, grenades and automatic rifles. At the least they are dangerous. At the worst the consequences could be serious. The pattern of these miserable operations is generally the same. A native with a smattering of education, or more intelligent than the rest, is selected by Soviet agents. He may be taken to Moscow. There he is brain-washed, so that he returns to his country a rabid agitator with his head turned by a lot of fine promises. His job now is to stir up trouble with the ultimate object of making himself the king, or at least the president. Weapons begin to come in for his supporters, so that if he can't get what he wants by talking he can resort to force of arms. Having made himself master of the situation, at the cost of God knows how many lives, the Soviet agents, under the guise of "advisers", move in and give orders. Coloured races have always been exploited — let's admit it — but never more than today.'

'So the overall picture looks like this,' Biggles said. 'On the one hand we and America, through organizations like Oxfam, are trying to help the native with food, clothing, agricultural machinery and education, while the communist countries, by giving them guns to kill each other, are hoping to get control of the country.'

The Air Commodore sighed. 'That's the English of it. We strive for peace and a better standard of living. This doesn't suit Russia and her satellites. They can only win by power, so they keep the coloured countries on the boil with guns and promises of big rewards if they win. Recent events have proved this. The tragedy is, the most backward peoples, poor, simple, misguided fools, believe this. They are naturally delighted to get guns for nothing. They can't see they stand to gain nothing by killing each other, and will in all probability lose their lives. They are told they are fighting for their freedom. In fact, they're likely to lose the freedom they already have.'

'It's pathetic,' muttered Biggles. 'Enough to make any decent man go hot under the collar.'

'I thought you'd feel like that about it,' returned the Air Commodore. 'We had a demonstration of what's going on when recently a consignment of war material, thought to be bound for the Congo, went adrift. An aircraft, having to make a forced landing at Malta, was found to have on board guns, and parachutes to drop them, worth £90,000.'

'That was a queer business, and as you may imagine I was more than somewhat interested. It was nothing to do with me and I never heard how it

ended,' Biggles answered. 'If my memory serves me the machine was a 72-seater Constellation owned by a charter company. It was said the guns were communist stuff and the parachutes were British. There were rumours of another aircraft being involved in the same game, an Argonaut D.C.4. What made the thing look fishy was a change of registration and the adoption of Ghanaian markings. Operators don't do that sort of thing without a reason. The route to the Congo was thought to be via Egypt, Libya and the Sudan. What shook me was, some of the pilots and air crews were American. Don't they realize what they're doing?'

'The machines were thought to be operating from somewhere in Europe,' went on the Air Commodore. 'It doesn't do to jump to conclusions. There are firms that will sell arms to anyone who can afford to pay for them; which means foreign governments. Ordinary people can't afford things like tanks or cannon. And in the matter of free-lance pilots, you will remember why an Air Police Force was started. It was thought that some out-of-work pilots might try their hands at criminal enterprises; and that, as we know, has happened. There are still quite a few pilots at a loose end. Some advertise for jobs. "Fly anything, anywhere," is their slogan. If they engage in crooked business it is the men who employ them who are really to blame.'

Biggles shook his head, slowly. 'In this matter of guns it's hard to see what we can do about it. If these planes are taking off from somewhere in Europe half their pay-load must be taken up by petrol. Knowing what they're doing they're not likely to accept orders to land, so how are we going to stop them? If the guns are being run by communist countries, as you seem to think, they wouldn't be likely to employ their own aircraft and crews. They'd take on pilots of any nationality, fellows who would be attracted by high wages or perhaps just for the hell of it. To me that's understandable.'

'It isn't understandable to me if they realize, as they must, that they're helping an enemy against their own country,' declared the Air Commodore sternly.

Biggles shrugged. 'There have always been men prepared to turn a blind eye to that angle if the money is big enough.'

'They're traitors.'

'All right. So they're traitors. To whom? Surely that would depend on their nationality. A man can't be a traitor to a country to which he owes no allegiance. You can reckon that if it came to the point they'd plead ignorance, and deny any such intent as helping an enemy. That could be true. I'd say they have only one interest. Money. Anyway, how are you going to catch 'em? They'd have to be caught red handed to establish a case against them in court, even if what they're doing is illegal. I see another snag there. Is it illegal?'

The Air Commodore considered the question. 'What their punishment would be would probably depend on the country in which they were arrested. I don't think we need quibble about that. Apart from anything else they're breaking every rule in International Air Traffic Regulations by flying

indiscriminately over countries without permission, crossing frontiers without checking in, probably ignoring prohibited areas and the regular civil aviation routes. By doing that they are putting the lives of all air travellers in peril. What is the use of having safety regulations if a few selfish pilots disregard them?’

Biggles answered. ‘Well, be that as it may, you first have to catch these fellows, and as far as I can see that could only happen by accident, as in the case of the machine that had to make an emergency landing at Malta. In my view, the pilots who are flying these machines are not so much to blame as the men who are employing them; and they, I imagine, are nicely tucked away behind the Iron Curtain.’

‘Not necessarily. In view of what happened at Malta there’s reason to believe that, although the finance may be coming from behind the Iron Curtain, the actual operations are being conducted by at least one organization in Western Europe, perhaps with agents in Britain. Some of the equipment found in the machine that landed at Malta was said to be British. If that is correct, how did it happen?’

‘If it comes to that, how was it that the aircraft was an American type?’

‘These are the men we really want to get. If we could lay hands on one of their pilots, and make him see the error of his ways, he might tell us who they are.’

‘It would be optimistic to reckon on that,’ replied Biggles. ‘How do you propose to get hold of one, anyway? I hope you aren’t going to ask me to shoot down British or American pilots, even if I was lucky enough to find one in the air, on the job.’

‘We shall have to think of a way to pick up one of them on the ground.’

‘You say *we*. Who is *we*? Why has this unpleasant job been pushed on to us? By us I mean Great Britain. To stop this gun-running racket is in the interest of all the Western powers. Why don’t they do something about it? Why leave us to carry the can?’

‘Although I have no definite information on the subject, I have no doubt they are doing something about it; but they’re not likely to let their methods of dealing with the problem be known because that would be playing straight into the hands of the enemy, who would take steps accordingly.’

Biggles rubbed out his cigarette in the ash-tray. ‘I don’t get it. Russia is openly supplying arms to half a dozen countries that are not exactly friends of ours. As far as I know we do nothing to stop it.’

‘We can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘That’s a different matter.’

‘In what way?’

‘The countries you have in mind, the Yemen and Indonesia, for instance, have established governments, and as such they are within their rights to buy any weapons they want.’

‘Even if the weapons are in fact a gift, intended to cause trouble for us.’

‘We know that, but how are you going to prove it?’

The new independent African states, like the Congo, are different. There, weapons are being supplied to overthrow the governments that have been accepted by the Western powers. Remember, these same rebels recently murdered in cold blood a lot of innocent white men and women who were being held as hostages; missionaries, school-teachers and medical people; as well as committing other atrocities. If we accused Russia of supplying weapons to these rebels she could retaliate by pointing out that we were supplying arms to *her* enemies.’

‘That would not be strictly true. Any arms we have supplied have been purely for defence.’

‘Russia and her satellites would argue on the same lines. Every time a few rebels are killed she howls her head off and lets loose a horde of students to throw bottles through the windows of the British and American Embassies, which the police do not attempt to prevent. But we’re getting away from the point. Forget the political angle. That isn’t for us to sort out. We have been asked to check the illegal flow of war material into countries where we are doing our best to maintain law and order. If these rebels are deprived of guns and ammunition they’ll have to pack up, which in the long run will be for their own good. They haven’t the money to buy them, but while they can get them free they’ll go on shooting their black brothers. Now, how do you suggest we go about it? I’m asking for your advice.’

‘I wish you’d ask me something easier,’ said Biggles.

‘I’ve heard you say there’s always a way of doing anything if it can be found,’ reminded the Air Commodore.

‘This dirty business may be the exception to the rule,’ replied Biggles. ‘I can’t see myself shooting down a machine that could turn out to be unarmed, and possibly flown by a man with whom I’ve had a drink at some time or other. I think, before we do anything else, we should be sure of our facts by finding out what exactly is going on, how the racket is being run and by whom. When I think of the good men I’ve killed in wartime combat it wouldn’t cause me any grief or pain to bump off some of these enemy agents who are inducing these stupid, benighted Negroes, to kill each other.’

‘Very well. Get the information, the facts, to start with. How do you propose to do that?’

‘I can think of only one practical way. I might join the ranks of these “fly anything, anywhere” boys and get myself taken on as a gun-runner. In that way I might get the lowdown on the way the racket is being run.’

The Air Commodore stared. ‘You call that *practical*! You must be out of your mind.’

‘What’s wrong with the idea?’

‘In the first place you’re too well known. You’d be spotted instantly, and that would be the end of you.’

‘The fact that I’m well known, as you say, might be to my advantage.’

‘How?’

‘Fire me.’

‘*Fire* you!’

Biggles smiled. ‘Give me the sack. Let it be known that I’ve been a naughty boy so I’m out of a job. If my reputation stands for anything I shouldn’t be out of work for long.’

The Air Commodore sat back in his chair and put his finger-tips together. ‘Do you realize what you’re saying? Smash the reputation it has taken most of your life to build up? Think of the effect such a tragedy would have on your friends.’

‘A fig for reputations. I’m thinking more of the effect being chucked out on my ear would have on my enemies. They’d be tickled to death to see me drawing the National Assistance dole.’

The Air Commodore spoke with a tone of finality. ‘I won’t even consider it. That’s definite. I’m not throwing you to the lions for the sake of cornering a bunch of mercenary rats.’

‘This sort of thing has been done before,’ argued Biggles. ‘Service officers have allowed themselves to be cashiered in order to get into foreign services for espionage work.’

‘Say no more about it,’ requested the Air Commodore curtly.

‘You asked for an idea,’ complained Biggles.

‘I’ve given you my answer. Think of something else.’

‘All right. There’s an alternative. Let it be known that I’ve been retired at my own request, or under the age limit rule.’

‘That wouldn’t be so bad,’ conceded the Air Commodore. ‘But I still don’t like it. It wouldn’t be fair to you.’

‘That doesn’t come into it. It would be so simple. All I’d have to do would be take a two-room flat somewhere and wait for offers of a job to come in.’

‘And if they didn’t come in?’

‘I’d put a small advertisement in certain selected papers saying I was free to take up an appointment. I wouldn’t be able to go near the Yard, but I could keep in touch with you by telephone. Algy, Bertie and Ginger, could carry on here, but for obvious reasons I wouldn’t be able to go near them. I work this on my own. Leave the arrangements to me.’

The Air Commodore pursed his lips. ‘I’ll think about it,’ he decided. ‘And that for the moment is as far as I’m prepared to go.’

‘Do that, sir. You asked for a scheme. I’ve given you one. I can’t see anything against it.’

‘You would, before you were through with it, I’ll warrant,’ retorted the Air Commodore grimly.

‘I’ll get along,’ Biggles said, rising. At the door he turned. ‘It’s the only way.’

‘I’ll call you later,’ promised the Air Commodore. ‘Go and have your

lunch.'

Biggles made his way, slowly and deep in thought, to his own office, where he found Algy, Bertie and Ginger, awaiting his return.

'Well, old boy, what's the big news?' inquired Bertie cheerfully.

'The news, if you can call it big, is that I may soon be leaving you,' answered Biggles evenly.

'What are you talking about?' asked Ginger, suspiciously. 'Is this some sort of joke?'

'No.'

'He's kidding,' put in Algy.

'I'm serious,' stated Biggles unsmilingly. 'I'm expecting to be retired in the near future under the age limit rule. If it happens you'll be on your own. Let's go to the pub round the corner for a cut from the joint and I'll tell you about it.'

CHAPTER 3

A PROPOSITION

Biggles, seated at the table in the still strange surroundings of the new, small, first-floor flat he had taken in the Bayswater district (two rooms and a kitchenette) stubbed his cigarette in the ash-tray and turned over the pages of the current number of the magazine *Flight*. His expression was not one of contentment. It was more one of disappointment, for it had begun to look as though his plan — to which the Air Commodore had reluctantly agreed — was not going to work. Moreover, he was getting bored with doing nothing, and living without the companionship to which he was accustomed.

It was three weeks since, having said *au revoir* to the Air Commodore, he had walked out of the police office at Scotland Yard for what, officially, was to be the last time, and moved with some clothes and his toilet things into his new quarters. A brief notice of his resignation had appeared in one or two newspapers, and a paragraph or two, mostly about his Air Force career, in the aviation press; but these had not produced the result for which he had hoped, and, indeed, had planned. When at the end of a week he had not received a single offer of employment, or even an inquiry, he had inserted a small advertisement in the personal column of a newspaper which he thought most likely to produce results. In this he had not given his address, merely a box number for replies, in the first place in writing. This, he had decided, would give him time to consider them.

Again the result had been disappointing. When, in three days there had not been a single reply, he repeated the advertisement, giving his name and telephone number. In this, in his impatience, he may have been premature, for on the same day two letters had arrived in the same post, both suggesting an interview. As he did not want two visitors arriving together, which might have been embarrassing, he had seen them at different times.

The first man he dismissed at once. He arrived, slightly tipsy, claiming to be an old R.F.C. pilot. He was hoping to borrow some money.

The second was equally optimistic. A young fellow of about eighteen had thought out a scheme which he claimed was foolproof. The project, boiled down, resolved itself into a plan for smuggling by air. He left the flat crestfallen when he was informed, bluntly, that his brainwave was neither original nor practicable, and if he ever found a pilot stupid enough to co-operate they would both end up in prison.

Biggles was becoming depressed when, the following day, had come a letter from a man signing himself Count Alexander Stavropulos, at present staying at the Grosvenor Hotel, London. It was brief and to the point. The writer stated he was a company director in the air charter business. He was looking for an experienced pilot to fly his aircraft. He was too busy to call, so

would Biggles meet him in his suite at the hotel? Biggles called him on the telephone. An appointment was made, and this was the day: time, 12 noon. A glance at his watch told him he still had a little time to spare.

He was not very confident that he had got a bite from the fish, or one of the fish, he was after, but two details encouraged him to think it might be. The first was, the Count was presumably a foreigner, the title 'Count' having gone out of use in Britain, although there were still countesses, normally the wives or widows of earls. His English was fluent, although there was a barely perceptible foreign accent, one not easy to place. Few people are able to speak a second language so well that they can pass as a national of another country. Again, the Count was staying at a hotel, which suggested, although it did not prove, that he had no fixed address in Britain. Apart from this, the hotel indicated the Count was well off, for the Grosvenor is not cheap, yet the Count could afford not merely a room but the luxury of a suite.

Still with plenty of time in hand for the appointment, Biggles decided to take some exercise by walking across the park to the hotel. It was with an open mind that he set off, resolved not to prejudge the man he was to meet. He arrived with a few minutes to spare, so he smoked a cigarette in the hall before stating his purpose at the reception desk.

To the man in charge of the keys he said: 'I have an appointment with Count Stavropulos. I've never met him. Do you know him?'

'Only by sight.'

'What sort of man is he?'

'Always very nice to me when he wants his key.'

'What's his nationality, do you know?'

'I've always understood he was one of these Greek oil millionaires.'

'Does he often stay here?'

'Quite a lot,' answered the man at the desk, picking up the telephone to call the man under discussion to inform him that a Mr Bigglesworth had arrived to see him. He hung up, beckoned to a page, and in a minute Biggles was in the lift being escorted to the Count's rooms.

The page knocked on a door. A voice said 'Come in.' The page pushed open the door. Biggles entered. The page retired, closing the door behind him, and Biggles advanced into a sitting-room to meet a man who rose from an armchair, putting aside a newspaper.

His greeting gave Biggles a mild shock, for he had not mentioned any rank. 'Come in, Inspector,' said the Count. 'Happy to meet you. My name is Stavropulos.'

'Why the Inspector?' queried Biggles.

The Count smiled disarmingly. 'As far as I know there's only one Bigglesworth with your reputation.'

'Well, you might make it *mister* from now on,' returned Biggles. 'I don't want to be reminded of my sinister past.'

'Good. Take a seat.'

Biggles sat in a second armchair.

‘Smoke?’ The Count offered his case — a gold one. ‘You may not care for these,’ he went on. ‘I have them specially made for me, but they’re not to everyone’s taste.’

Biggles noticed the colour of the cigarette paper was pale brown, a tint common in Russia and the Near East. ‘I’ll smoke my own if you don’t mind,’ he declined. ‘I have a common taste.’

‘Have a drink?’

‘Not at the moment, thanks. It’s a bit early for me.’

‘That’s what I like to hear from a man who sometimes has other people’s lives in his hands,’ declared the Count. ‘You won’t think me discourteous if I have one?’

‘Of course not. These are your rooms.’

While the Count was pouring his drink at the sideboard Biggles took stock of him. He was still keeping an open mind, for although he knew that first impressions can be important, they are not infallible. There had been nothing questionable in the Count’s behaviour so far. He had at least been hospitable. Curiously, although it sometimes happens, his foreign accent was not as pronounced as it had been on the telephone. The smoke of his cigarette, as it wafted across the room, came from Balkan tobacco. Of course, there was nothing wrong with that. Some smokers prefer it, although it is more usual for a man to smoke the tobacco to which he was first introduced. In England it is usually Virginian.

Biggles judged the Count to be a man a little past middle age; say, between forty-five and fifty. Of average height, he was rather plump, as if he did himself well. His skin, without a wrinkle on it, was that curious colour, almost a pallor, peculiar to the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece in particular. His hair was beginning to recede from the temples. His clothes were immaculate and obviously expensive. He moved easily. In a word, his general appearance might have been described as sleek; sleek in the manner of a well-fed house cat. But there was nothing objectionable about him, in appearance, manner, or the way he spoke. Nevertheless, prejudiced perhaps from unfortunate experience, the man was a type Biggles would not have trusted too far until he knew him better.

The Count, glass in hand, returned to Biggles and sat down facing him. ‘Now suppose we get down to business,’ he said.

‘That is why I am here,’ answered Biggles.

‘You are an aeroplane pilot with a great deal of experience.’ This was a statement rather than a question.

‘I think I can claim to be that.’

‘And you are now out of work?’

‘I’m not flying at the moment.’

‘And you’re open to accept an engagement?’

‘That is why I advertised for a job.’

'You needn't answer this question if you don't want to. Why did you leave your last job?'

'You know what it was?'

'Of course. I read the newspapers.'

'Let us say my time had expired. There comes a time for a man to retire, particularly when his work involves a certain amount of strain.'

'But you are still fit to fly?'

'If I wasn't I wouldn't be so stupid as to look for another job in aviation.'

'You could still fly an aeroplane to any part of the world?'

'Without any difficulty whatever.'

'And you would be prepared to do that?'

'Within a certain limit.'

'What limit?'

'I wouldn't fly over Russia or any other country in the communist bloc.'

'Why not?'

'I have occasionally come into collision with some of their agents and I'm afraid I may be on their black list.'

'You are not a communist yourself, then?'

'No. Are you?'

'Certainly not. But the question of politics need not arise. I do my best to avoid trouble, so my planes do not fly over Soviet controlled territory.'

'I'm glad to hear it. That suits me. Where do they fly?'

'To wherever my business requires them to go.'

'You say planes, in the plural. Does that mean you have more than one?'

'At present I have three; one for my personal use and two for operations.'

'I take it you run a charter business?'

'Call it an air transportation service.'

'Which means you already have pilots and air crews?'

'Of course. At the moment I am one pilot short.'

'How did that happen?'

'I had to discharge him. He drank too much and became careless.'

'Where are your machines based?'

'Nowhere in particular. They move about. They remain at wherever they find themselves until the next operation comes along — in the manner of a deep sea tramp steamer looking for a cargo. At present the two freight machines are on the Continent.' The Count sipped his drink. 'But you seem to be asking the questions. My intention was to ask you some. Have you ever flown over Africa?'

'Often.'

'Then you can find your way about?'

'I have never had any difficulty.'

'So you — shall we say — know the ropes? Regulations. How to deal with Customs controls, and so on.'

'After the years I've been flying it's time I did.'

‘You must understand that you wouldn’t have the special privileges you had on your last job.’

Biggles’ muscles tightened. ‘What do you mean by that, exactly?’

‘Well, I assume in the work you were doing recently you would be provided with extra facilities. To put it bluntly, when you were employed on flying duties for Scotland Yard.’

‘Does what I have been doing make any difference?’

‘Not as far as I’m concerned. It could be an advantage. I had that in mind. If you worked for me you would be expected to keep within the law, not break it. Of course, my business is confidential, in that my clients do not want it to be known to their competitors what they are consigning overseas.’

‘That’s understandable. It applies to most business transactions, surface, as well as air transport.’

The Count’s eyes came to rest on Biggles’ face. With a slight change of tone he asked: ‘Why did you really leave your last job?’

‘I thought the reason had been made public.’

‘What is your own version of it?’

‘I held the job for a long time, but it was getting rather heavy going for a man of my age.’

‘But you still want to go on flying?’

‘Naturally. Once a pilot always a pilot. Moreover, a man must live, and I can’t afford to do nothing. While we are on the subject, let me be frank. Aren’t you afraid to employ a man who has been connected with the police?’

The Count’s eyebrows went up. ‘Why should I be?’

‘It was a thought that struck me. No doubt there are plenty of other pilots ready to fly for hire and reward, as it is called.’

‘Not many with your experience.’

‘What’s so special about flying your machines?’

‘My work calls for knowledge and ability above the average. I need hardly tell you that a modern aircraft is an expensive vehicle, and to lose one, as might happen through carelessness or inefficiency, would mean a severe financial loss. Our pilots must be absolutely reliable. You see, in order to save the expense of landing fees, and so on, we sometimes fly long distances non-stop. As a straight line is the shortest distance between two points it also means a saving on petrol; and aviation spirit isn’t cheap.’

‘Are you saying, when you talk of non-stop flights, that you don’t mind cutting corners, so to speak, should the route—’

‘That is entirely a matter for the pilot to decide,’ broke in the Count. ‘Naturally, I wouldn’t ask a pilot to break the air traffic regulations on my account even though it might save me money. If they care to take risks in order to get to their destination in the shortest possible time, that is their affair. All I ask is, if they are caught at such practices — and there are pilots who do that sort of thing — they must take the consequences and not expect any help from us. We, as the owners of the aircraft, would naturally plead ignorance,

and say the pilot was acting contrary to orders.'

A ghost of a smile crossed Biggles' face. 'Naturally,' he repeated dryly. 'It's only right that those who break the rules should take the blame.'

'I'm glad you agree.' The Count went on. 'No one would suspect you of doing anything like that, which would be another advantage of having you on our staff. Of course, should it happen, I'm not going to say we would wash our hands over the whole affair. We might have to do that officially, you understand, but we would support our employee as far as possible and compensate him for any financial loss he might sustain — by being fined, for instance.'

'That's fair enough,' Biggles replied. 'What sort of loads do you usually carry?'

'We carry anything; general merchandise; but that's a question I can't really answer. An inquiry comes through from a customer. He tells us the nature of the consignment, where it is to go, and when, and a price is agreed.'

'Always taking care that no smuggling is attempted, of course.'

The Count looked shocked. 'We take care never to touch anything like that, you may be sure. I repeat, we do nothing illegal. Our pilots are warned never to carry privately anything that might be suspect — drugs, and that sort of thing, which may be a temptation.'

'How many pilots do you employ?'

'Normally four. They fly dual, with a qualified navigator, if one is available.'

Biggles nodded. 'Now let us come to the most important point. What salaries do you pay your pilots?'

'We pay a retaining fee of two thousand pounds a year plus a bonus for actual flying time at the rate of one hundred pounds an hour. Flights are irregular. A pilot doesn't fly every day, or even every week. We pay all his expenses while he is on the ground, wherever he may be.'

'That seems generous.'

I'm glad you think so. All that remains then, is for you to decide if you would like to join us.'

'Does that mean you are offering me the job?'

'Yes.'

'Don't you want to see my log-books, or any other proof of my qualifications?'

'That's unnecessary. I know as much about you as I need to know. You're known to everyone in aviation circles, as I discovered when I made some discreet inquiries. With the private lives of our pilots we are not concerned. All we ask is they do what is asked of them, without question, efficiently and consciously. If they fail in these respects we have no further use for them. Have I made myself clear?'

'Perfectly clear.'

'Very well. Perhaps you'd like to go now and think it over. If you decide to

enter my employment, and happen at the moment to be financially embarrassed, you may draw three months' pay in advance.'

'Isn't that taking a risk?'

'In what way?'

'Well, I might draw the money and clear off. You might never see me again.'

The Count's eyes narrowed. 'That would be very foolish of you. You would regret it.'

'What could you do about it?'

'My organization has long arms. I would see that you never got another job in aviation.'

'Well, I don't think that's likely to arise,' returned Biggles. 'There's nothing for me to think over. This seems to be the sort of job I was hoping to find. I'd like to give it a trial, anyway. I take it I'm at liberty to resign if for any reason I don't feel inclined to carry on?'

'Certainly.'

'Then let's call it settled. When would you like me to start?'

'There's no particular urgency, but as soon as possible. Could you be ready by tomorrow evening?'

'Yes.'

'That would suit me because I have to go to the Continent on business. My personal pilot will fly me in my plane. You could come with us. Don't bring more luggage than is necessary.'

'Where shall I meet you?'

'You might as well come here. We'll go on to the airport in my car.'

'What airport?'

'Southend. It's convenient for the Continent. I leave the ground at six o'clock.'

'As a matter of professional interest, what's the type of machine?'

'A *Courier*. It has six seats. Twin engines. Do you know it?'

'I've seen one, but I've never actually flown one. Being American there aren't many over here. Where are we going?'

'That hasn't been decided yet. I'm waiting for a message now.' The Count smiled. 'We shall not be landing the wrong side of the Iron Curtain, if that's what you're worried about.'

'I'm glad to know that,' Biggles admitted frankly. 'I have had some unusual jobs to do in my time and I have reasons for keeping clear of that part of the world.' He got up. 'Okay, sir. I have no more questions to ask, so if you have none I needn't occupy any more of your time. See you here, tomorrow evening. What time?'

'Say, five o'clock.'

'I'll be here, ready to travel,' promised Biggles. With that he departed.

CHAPTER 4

BIGGLES DOES SOME THINKING

On the pavement outside the hotel Biggles looked for a disengaged taxi, but not seeing one he decided to walk home the way he had come. His head was full of what had passed at the interview and he wanted to turn over in his mind what had been said while the conversation was still fresh. Crossing the park, on the pretext of lighting a cigarette, he looked back to see if he was being followed; but he saw nothing to arouse his suspicions. Noticing an unoccupied bench, the weather being fair, he sat down to try to reach some conclusions.

The first question was, naturally, was he on the right track? Was the Count the man, or one of the top men, of the organization whose activities he had been asked to investigate? It was possible, but by no means certain. Instinct, or intuition, told him the proposition looked — well, odd. For one thing the salary he had been offered was somewhat higher than a legitimate commercial undertaking could afford to pay. That alone made him suspicious. How could a firm show a profit if it paid the pilot alone a bonus of four hundred pounds for a simple flight of four hours; say, two hundred out and two hundred home. If the concern was genuine it would have to enjoy a very profitable line of business.

On the face of it the Count had been frank in answering questions, more so than might have been expected of a man engaged in air operations of a questionable nature; yet, in point of fact, he had disclosed nothing that suggested anything improper.

How much did the Count know about him? He certainly knew something of his career... what his previous occupation had been. Yet he was willing, almost anxious, to take him on. If he was doing anything illegal there was something very strange about that. Or was there? When Biggles had hinted at it the Count had put forward reasons that sounded perfectly valid. In the first place he, the Count, was only interested in a pilot of exceptional ability and experience, and apparently in that respect Biggles filled the bill. Again, he wanted someone who knew his way about the world, as against an ex-regular airline pilot whose work may have been confined to one or two particular routes. There was yet another angle not to be overlooked. The Count was aware that Biggles was known at airports everywhere, and in view of his previous occupation would probably be able to command facilities not normally available to a pilot less well known. True, the Count had said he would no longer be able to rely on these facilities; but Biggles would be trusted. His word would be accepted. He had friends in five continents who could be relied on to be helpful in an emergency. Was that the *real* reason why the Count had been anxious to secure his services? Could be, reasoned

Biggles.

Yet in his mind there was a doubt. The money. It was too much. Was it a bribe? To buy what? His silence if anything went wrong? No, the proposition that had been put up to him was — well — peculiar.

To start with there was the man's name. His title meant nothing. It might, or might not, be genuine. There was nothing much wrong with that, either way. He knew that on the Continent Counts were ten a penny, although few of the men who boasted the title had the right to do so. It was a matter of vanity, such men supposing, presumably, that it lifted them above the common herd. Anyhow, in Britain the title Count was no longer used. So being a Count gave no indication of the man's nationality beyond the fact that he was not British by birth. But that was evident from his accent, slight though it was.

The name Alexander was no guide. Originally it was Eastern European or possibly Asiatic. Alexander the Great, a Macedonian, to celebrate a victory had laid it down that any male child born in that particular year should be named Alexander. Over the centuries their descendants had spread all over the world taking the name with them — even to Scotland. Stavropulos was of course as Greek as could be. He looked Greek, although that did not mean this was the nationality shown on his passport.

Biggles went on speculating. The Count did not mind him knowing that he smoked Balkan tobacco. That didn't mean much, although as a man usually smokes the tobacco on which he is brought up, it suggested he was well acquainted with the Near East.

For the most part he could not have been more open. Only in one or two details had he been evasive; his refusal to name their destination when they left Southend, for instance. However, Southend airport seemed a reasonable starting point; there could be nothing phoney about that. He had half expected the Count to name some out-of-the-way landing ground. If he was using a public airport as a base for his aircraft in England he could have nothing to hide. This supported his insistence that what he was doing was legitimate.

This was puzzling. Could he have his own opinion of what was legal and what was not? The importation of weapons and ammunition to undeveloped countries, for example? Even the Air Commodore had been in doubt as to the legality of such an operation. He had taken the view that it would depend on who the weapons were for. An established government would be entitled to buy them, and pay for them. There would be nothing wrong in that. But if they were intended for rebels hoping to overthrow that government, it would be a different matter. Even so, it might be argued that the British, or any other government, had no right to interfere. Looked at like that, it was a moral issue rather than a legal one. It was not much use the United Nations handing out food, money and goods, to improve a native standard of living, and keep the peace, while other people were giving them guns to start a civil war.

Who was supplying the guns? Where were they coming from? Rebels would hardly be in a position to buy them. They were being given away. The

obvious answer was Russia, and the reason a political one. By this means Russia was hoping, if the rebels could seize power, to gain control of the country, or countries, concerned. Yet the Count had stated positively that his aircraft never went beyond the Iron Curtain. In that case, if he was a gunrunner, how was he getting the guns? How could he say he never crossed the communist frontiers if it were not true, knowing that sooner or later Biggles was bound to learn facts? It was all very confusing.

The thought crossed Biggles' mind that the whole thing might be a trick to get him out of the country for motives of revenge. During his career he had made many enemies, not only in the underworld, but among enemy agents. He dismissed the thought, thinking it unlikely that anyone would go to the trouble and expense to kidnap him merely to gratify a grudge. No, that wasn't the answer, particularly as he had now ostensibly left the police service. He felt reasonably sure that the Count did really want him for flying duties. Could it be that someone in Western Europe or America was playing an underhand game for mercenary or political motives? It was not impossible, but it seemed extremely unlikely. That the Count was in the business for money he did not doubt. He was not the type to put himself out for any other reason.

So pondered Biggles on his park seat. His conjectures had not got him very far. He should, he told himself as he got up and continued on his way home, know what it was all about within the next two or three days. He wondered who his co-pilots would be? It would be odd if one of them turned out to be a man he knew, an old comrade of war-flying days, perhaps. Not that it seemed very likely, although it could happen. That could cut two ways. It might be to his advantage; on the other hand it might prove embarrassing.

Arriving home, the first thing he did was telephone the office at Scotland Yard. Algy answered.

Biggles said: 'I've rung up to let you know I've been offered a job in an air charter concern; mostly freight, I gather. I've decided to take it, to see where it leads. It's owned by a man I believe to be Greek. His name is Count Alexander Stavropoulos. He has a suite at the Grosvenor Hotel, Victoria. He's often there. I don't know quite what to make of him. I can see nothing really wrong so far, although the way the show is run seems a bit unusual. You might check up on him, and if he has a police record let me know. You haven't much time because tomorrow evening I'm leaving the country with him, in his own personal aircraft, from Southend. I'll let you know where I am, and what I'm doing, at the first opportunity. That shouldn't be long. If you don't hear from me within a week you can assume things are not as they should be... No, I don't know where we are going, but I have the Count's assurance we shan't touch the Iron Curtain. That's about all. Let the Air Commodore know what goes on; and if you dig up any information about my new boss ring me early tomorrow morning. That's all for now. I expect to be here until tomorrow afternoon. Now I'm going out to get some lunch. So long.'

CHAPTER 5

ALWAYS THE UNEXPECTED

It was with no small curiosity that Biggles noted the course of the *Courier*, in which he was a passenger, as soon as it was over the sea.

He had been told they would be going overseas, and within minutes of take-off he observed that this was true. After the machine had made some altitude and settled down to steady flight, he made out the course to be practically due south-east, although this did not mean it would be maintained.

Seated in the comfortable cabin with his new employer, he had no instruments, no compass, to indicate a change of course. In daylight this was not important, but after dark, supposing they had some distance to go, with no landmarks visible, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to work out their probable destination. It was six-thirty when the aircraft had left the ground and already the sun was well on its way down behind them.

Visualizing the map of Europe, he had no difficulty in working out the countries that lay in front of them, as long as the south-easterly course was held. When they made a landfall it would either be the coast of Belgium or Northern France. Then, if they did not land in either of these countries, would come Germany, Austria, Hungary or Yugoslavia, Greece and finally Turkey. He could not imagine going beyond that. Without knowing their final destination it was of course impossible to work out their E.T.A. That is, their estimated time of arrival.

He was still puzzled by the apparently open and above-board way things had gone; so far, anyway. With a minimum of luggage in one light suitcase, he had met the Count in his hotel suite as arranged. Nothing much had been said. The Count's behaviour had been the same as on the previous occasion. It may have been a little more brisk, although this was to be expected if he had work to do—the alleged business trip, legitimate or otherwise. On this point Biggles was still keeping an open mind. He was still without a scrap of evidence as to the real purpose of this unusual engagement.

'Are you ready?' was all the Count had said when he presented himself.

'I'm ready,' stated Biggles.

'Good. Then we might as well get along.'

Below, at the main hotel entrance, a car was waiting; a car with a uniformed chauffeur. From the few words that passed Biggles got the impression that the vehicle was a hired one; either that or the driver was new.

The Count said: 'You know where we are going?'

'Yes, sir. Southend Airport.'

'Correct. Drive carefully.'

'I always do, sir.'

That was all. Another minute and they were on their way.

The drive to Southend was uneventful. The Count said little and Biggles did not attempt to force conversation. He had plenty to occupy his mind. There were several questions he could have asked, but as these might have hinted at the way his brain was working, he left them unasked. Surely, he thought, as they were going abroad, in the ordinary way the Count would have checked that he had brought his passport — which in fact he had. But the Count hadn't mentioned a passport. There was something odd about that, unless the Count had taken it for granted.

On the way to the airport the Count said: 'Would you prefer to draw your salary in cash, or by cheque?'

'It makes no difference to me,' answered Biggles.

'It could.'

'How?'

'Well, if you take your money in cash there would be no need to declare it for income tax, particularly if you are domiciled abroad. Some people object to giving half their earnings to the government.'

Biggles hesitated. This was the first suggestion the Count had made that was not strictly on the level. Even so, it was not an uncommon practice.

The Count went on. 'Or, if you care to give me the name of your bank, I will arrange for your salary to be paid into your account every month.'

'That might be the best way,' Biggles decided, as if the matter was of no great importance. 'I don't like to carry a lot of money on me.'

'Very wise,' said the Count.

After a long pause he continued. 'I have a feeling you're still a little anxious about the work you will be asked to do.'

'Frankly, I am,' replied Biggles. 'Not having the least idea of what it will be.'

'I have already given you my assurance that you will not be asked to do anything illegal.'

'I haven't forgotten that,' returned Biggles, thinking it strange that the Count should make such a remark, because in a genuine concern it would hardly be necessary to say such a thing. Was it that the Count was 'sailing near the wind' without doing anything which in court, could be alleged to be criminal?

'I wouldn't risk losing my most valuable asset,' Biggles said flatly.

'What is that?'

'My pilot's licence.'

'I can understand that. What would you call an illegal transaction?'

'Smuggling, for instance.'

'I have already told you we can run our business profitably without anything of that sort,' returned the Count, stiffly.

'I wasn't thinking of you, personally, but I know from experience that air crews, even in the national air operating companies, have been known to try it on. The profits of drug-running, even on a small scale, are high.'

‘Any employee of ours found attempting anything like that would be sacked on the spot,’ declared the Count, severely.

They reached the airport to find the Courier waiting.

There was no trouble. The Count seemed to be well known to the officials and the usual formalities went smoothly. When they went out to the aircraft Biggles caught a glimpse of a face in the control cabin. The man grinned and gave him the ‘thumbs up’ sign. One of the airport staff put the baggage on board and closed the door. Apparently the pilot had already received his instructions, for the Count did not speak to him, nor did he come into the cabin. In a few minutes the *Courier* was in the air, on its way to wherever it was going.

With the coast behind them, when they had settled down and the Count had lighted one of his ‘special’ cigarettes, he said: ‘We have a long flight in front of us. Is there anything else you would like to know?’

‘Naturally, I would be interested to know where we are going,’ answered Biggles. ‘I’ve done a lot of flying, but this is the first time, I believe, that I have found myself airborne without the remotest idea of my ultimate destination.’

‘Why didn’t you mention it earlier,’ said the Count, smoothly. ‘There’s no reason why you shouldn’t know. We shall fly non-stop to Noriovika.’

‘I thought I knew most aerodromes, but that’s a new one on me. I’ve never heard of it. Where is it, exactly?’

‘Noriovika is the name of a village in northern Greece,’ informed the Count readily. ‘In Greek Macedonia, to be precise. We maintain a private airfield there. It was one of those put down during the Greek civil war against communist infiltrators from over the northern frontier. It was later abandoned and we took it over as a base.’

‘Why there?’ inquired Biggles, in mild surprise.

The Count answered without hesitation. ‘It was largely a matter of economy. In the first place it’s a central point for operations between East and West. Secondly, while we have to pay rent to the Greek government for the use of the land and buildings, there are no landing fees, which at some big airports can be ruinous. At Noriovika we can come and go as we please. We have it to ourselves.’

This sounded reasonable, but Biggles, always suspicious of anything unorthodox, found it unconvincing.

He couldn’t put a finger on anything in particular, but it was an unusual arrangement, to say the least. But still, it could happen. After all, if the Count was a Greek he might have some influence in his own country.

‘How do you get your petrol. Aviation spirit?’ he inquired.

The answer was ready. ‘It comes up from Salonica in a road tanker.’

‘The place must be close to the frontier of Yugoslavia,’ prompted Biggles.

‘It isn’t far away, but far enough.’

‘Does that mean we have to fly over Yugoslavia to get to it?’

‘Certainly not. Yugoslavia is a communist controlled country. I told you we never fly over territory held by Russia or her satellites.’

‘Sorry, so you did,’ agreed Biggles.

‘What a suspicious man you are.’

‘I have to be. Having fallen out with the Soviet Union on one or two occasions, if I found myself in their hands I might find it difficult to get away.’

‘How did you come to fall out with them — if the question isn’t a personal one?’

‘They took on a professional German agent who had a grudge against us for winning the war. Through my fault he failed in a certain assignment. For that he was sent to spend the rest of his life in the political prison on Sakhalin Island. I thought that was a bit tough, so I took out a plane and picked him up. That’s all there was to it.’¹

‘I’m not surprised you now keep clear of Russia,’ said the Count. ‘Well, you needn’t worry. Having crossed northern Italy we fly down the Adriatic and cross the coast into Greece just south of Albania, which is of course another communist country.’

‘Thanks. That’s all I wanted to know.’

This was followed by a long silence. Night drew its curtain across the face of the continent of Europe so that all was in darkness except for a million points of artificial light, sometimes in dense clusters where they marked the positions of towns and cities.

So the hours passed. Biggles dozed. He was awakened by the Count saying: ‘We shan’t be long now. You will shortly be meeting some of our staff, pilots and others. Except when they’re on leave they live at Norioivika.’

Biggles thought it a good sign that they were allowed to go on leave. He had been wondering if, having arrived at his destination, he would ever be allowed to leave — that is, if the show turned out to be ‘crooked’. If his suspicions proved unfounded he would have to find an excuse for handing in his resignation as early as was reasonable.

The *Courier* was now losing height. Biggles looked down at the ground, but learned little from his inspection. Over such country as they were now flying he did not expect to pick up a landmark. Moonlight glinted on a broad, winding river, which he imagined was either the Varda, which has its source in Yugoslavia and empties into the Gulf of Salonica, or the Struma, which rises in Bulgaria and ends in the Aegean Sea. As far as Biggles was concerned the river could be either, as both flow southwards through Greece.

For the rest, judging from the few lights showing, the country below was sparsely populated. He was still looking, thinking this would be a difficult place to reach except by air, when a green light started winking. This was quickly followed by an oval of what were obviously boundary lights. So this was it, he thought. They had arrived. He should soon know if he had wasted his time.

As they circled low to come in he observed that for the most part the

country, if not actually mountainous, was rugged. Without lights the aerodrome would be a difficult place to find at night. If the buildings were camouflaged it might not be easy in the broad light of day. But he was half prepared for this. He had never flown over this part of the Balkans, but he had a rough idea of what it was like from a lifetime of studying the atlas.

The *Courier* glided in to a good landing, although the wheels bumped a little as if the ground was rough. It suggested there was no concrete runway. The machine taxied on to a building of fair size, with lights showing from its several windows. It stopped.

The Count got up. 'This is where we get out,' he said. 'Come in and I'll introduce you to some of your colleagues. You'll find them decent fellows.'

They descended, passed through a wooden porch into a hall, and on to a door from behind which came the sound of voices. The Count opened it, and waved to Biggles to go in.

There were six men in a room reeking of tobacco smoke. It was comfortably furnished in the manner of an officers' mess. They sat round a table playing cards, some with drinks at their elbows. A babble of voices ended abruptly as all heads turned to look at the new arrivals.

One of the men seated at the table rose to his feet, and advancing slowly, with an accusing finger pointing at Biggles, said loudly, in a voice brittle with anger and astonishment: 'What the hell's *he* doing here?'

Biggles had already recognized the man, and although he tried not to show it, he was, to use one of his own expressions, fairly 'rocked on his heels' by shock. It was Canson, an ex-R.A.F. Flying Officer whom he had last seen in a French prison cell, he having been responsible for putting him there.²

In an atmosphere that had suddenly stiffened Canson cried, glancing at the card players: 'Do you know who this is?' Without waiting for an answer he went on: 'He's a cop. A flying cop. His name's Bigglesworth. He works for Scotland Yard.'

The tension could now be felt.

The pause had given Biggles time to recover. 'In view of where I last saw you, I might well say what are *you* doing here?'

Canson smiled craftily. 'They couldn't hold me,' he sneered, although exactly what he meant by this was not clear.

The Count now chipped in. 'What's this — what's this?' he said sharply. 'What are you two talking about?' Addressing Canson directly he continued: 'Do I understand you have a police record?'

Canson tried to brush off the question. 'I suppose I have,' he admitted. 'Thanks to him.' Again he pointed at Biggles.

'You didn't tell me.'

'It was nothing much. I was looking for a job. You don't start by shouting that you've been inside.'

'What was the trouble? I must know. A lot might depend on it.'

Another pause. Canson did not speak.

‘Will you tell him or shall I?’ queried Biggles evenly.

‘It was only a little matter of carrying currency notes,’ declared Canson casually. ‘I was on a good thing if this smart-alec hadn’t stuck his nose in.’

‘You’ve only yourself to blame for what happened,’ said Biggles coldly. ‘Had you stuck to genuine notes you might have got away with it. But when you started flooding the country with counterfeit notes you overplayed your hand.’

‘You can tell me about it sometime,’ said the Count, looking worried. ‘If you two are going to start by hating each other’s guts, one of you will have to go, or we may find ourselves in trouble.’

‘I’m prepared to let bygones be bygones if Canson is,’ said Biggles, with a shrug.

Canson did not answer.

The Count stopped the argument by thumbing a bell push. ‘Let’s have a drink,’ he said. To Biggles he added: ‘The waiter will show you your room.’

The pilot who had brought the *Courier* over, apparently having put the machine away, now came in.

He said, speaking with a strong transatlantic accent, looking around: ‘Say, what’s going on?’

‘Only a slight difference of opinion,’ answered Biggles, inconsequentially.

¹ See *Biggles Buries a Hatchet*.

² See *Biggles and the Black Mask*.

CHAPTER 6

THE FIRST JOB

Biggles, alone in the room that had been allotted to him — it was not much more than a cubicle — unpacked his bag, lit a cigarette and sat on the bed to do some serious thinking. He had realized from the outset that in joining the pilots employed by the Count there would always be the possibility of encountering someone he knew, or someone who knew him; but that it should be Canson, a man he had been responsible for sending to prison, was most unfortunate. It was bound to complicate matters. Almost anyone else would not have mattered. However, there it was. Considered objectively there was really nothing remarkable about it. Canson was a pilot with a not very savoury record. He would never have got a job with a big air operating company, so there was nothing surprising in finding him working for one that operated on irregular lines.

Biggles knew that Canson hated him, not without reason, and that being so would not miss an opportunity of doing him an injury. Already, no doubt, he would be doing his best to sow the seeds of suspicion and mistrust. If any of the other pilots had a guilty conscience the seeds would inevitably fall on fertile ground.

Another point Biggles did not overlook was this. Canson, even in his R.A.F. days had shown dishonest, if not criminal tendencies. It was hardly likely that he was a reformed character; so if it did not actually follow, his presence at Noriovika implied that the Count's organization was not so innocent as he had pretended. Time would show.

Thinking matters over, Biggles, always fatalistic, did not know whether to be glad or sorry things had turned out as they had. If the Count's business was in fact legitimate, so well and good. No harm had been done. On the other hand, if it was crooked, it might well be that he had found what he had set out to find; the headquarters of the gun-runners. The locality of the aerodrome was not without significance. Why choose a place like Noriovika for a base? There was something queer about that, even though the Count had provided an explanation which, if not convincing, was not unreasonable.

But Biggles could not shake off a feeling that the reason given was not the true one. At a remote spot like northern Greece he would almost certainly be free from interference. Local people, if there were any, would not be sufficiently interested to question what was going on. There had been no difficulty in getting to the place; but it might not be so easy to get out if ever the time came for him to do so, mused Biggles. Was that the reason, or one of the reasons, why the pilots of the Count's organization had been more or less isolated in the Balkans?

Biggles had no map to check the roads for possible surface transport in the

locality. Not having the least idea of where he was going, it had not been possible to study a map or atlas before the start. It was not until they were in the air that the Count had disclosed their destination. That must have been deliberate. Not knowing how far they were from the nearest frontier was a handicap, although that should sort itself out when he was asked to fly an aircraft. He could hardly be expected to fly without a map showing his base.

His train of thought was broken by a tap on the door. In answer to his invitation to enter it was opened to admit one of the men he had seen playing cards in the common- room; a slight figure with a freckled face and sandy hair.

‘I’ve just looked in to tell you that the Count has detailed me to be your flying partner,’ he announced cheerfully, in an unmistakable transatlantic accent. The name’s Grant. Bob Grant. The boys call me Sandy.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Sandy,’ returned Biggles. ‘You an American?’ ‘Canadian.’

‘Better still. What are you doing over here?’

‘Trying to keep the wolf from the door. I came over to have a look at Scotland, where my folks originally came from, lost my wallet gambling on the horses, so I took the first job that came along. Saw an ad. in the paper and here I am. That’s the story.’ Sandy’s tone of voice became serious. ‘By the way, Canson’s shooting off his mouth about you in the playroom — as we call it.’

Biggles smiled wryly. ‘That doesn’t surprise me.’

‘He says you were a cop.’

‘Quite right.’

‘Does the Count know that?’

‘Of course. That may have been why he took me on. I sort of know the ropes.’

Sandy nodded. ‘I suppose on a free-lance job like this one meets all sorts. Was it as a cop that you ran foul of Canson?’

‘Yes.’

‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know what Canson is saying about me, but you might as well hear my version of the story. Canson was a fool. He was batting on a good wicket, his own boss, running a small airline for a genuine travel agency. He made a bit on the side running currency notes; but when he started bringing into the country counterfeit notes that were being printed in France, he overplayed his hand and something had to be done about it. I happened to be the man who busted his racket. That’s all there was to it. Nothing personal.’

Sandy grinned. ‘I’m not surprised he doesn’t like you. You say there was nothing personal in it, but he doesn’t feel that way about you.’ Sandy went on darkly, ‘Take my tip and watch your step. What he isn’t threatening to do to you, given a chance, is nobody’s business.’

‘I’ll remember it.’

‘The trouble is, he’s setting the other fellers against you.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘All I can do is leave them to judge. Have any of them any reason to be afraid of me?’

‘Not that I know of. I’ve never been in any trouble myself.’

‘The Count’s business is above-board, isn’t it?’

Sandy’s brief hesitation before he answered was not lost on Biggles. ‘It is as far as I’m concerned. I don’t ask too many questions. I do what I’m told, draw my pay regular and keep my mouth shut no matter what I may think. That suits me.’

As Sandy seemed inclined to talk, Biggles made the most of this unexpected opportunity to learn more. ‘What sort of loads do you usually carry?’ he asked casually, as if the matter was of no real importance.

‘Mostly heavy stuff,’ answered Sandy, with the same carelessness.

‘What do you mean by heavy stuff?’

‘Tools, farm implements and spare parts — that sort of thing. Mostly for what are called the undeveloped countries. The idea is to teach them how to feed themselves, or so I’m told. I’ve carried sacks of wheat seed and fertilizers.’

‘Have you ever seen this stuff?’

‘No, I can’t say I have. Why should I want to see it? It usually comes crated in wooden boxes with the contents stencilled on the outside; so there’s no need to undo them. Why give ourselves extra work repacking the stuff?’

Biggles decided that Sandy, as far as he knew, was telling the truth. ‘Is it always this farm gear?’ he asked.

‘Not always. The other day I took a load of refrigerators to Ghana. I’ve taken wireless and TV sets to the Yemen. The longest run I’ve done so far was to Djakarta, in Indonesia.’

‘What did they want?’

‘Sewing-machines.’

Biggles smiled. ‘Ever cross the Atlantic?’

‘I haven’t myself, although Canson has made a couple of runs to Cuba.’

‘How do you manage for petrol on these long runs?’

‘We have certain places where we can always refuel on credit. The Count has an arrangement with Egypt, for instance. There’s no trouble there.’

‘Where do you collect things like refrigerators?’ asked Biggles.

‘We don’t. Practically everything is delivered here.’

‘How?’

‘By road.’

‘Any idea where the stuff comes from?’

‘Between ourselves I fancy a lot of it comes from Yugoslavia, which isn’t far away.’ Sandy’s eyes clouded with sudden suspicion. ‘You’re asking a lot of questions?’

‘Wouldn’t you, if you’d just arrived, and hadn’t a clue as to what you were expected to do? I’m still in the dark.’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ conceded Sandy. ‘But let me tell you this. The way to get unpopular with the Count is to start asking questions.’

‘Why? Doesn’t that strike you as a bit odd? Has he something to hide?’

‘Could be.’

‘How?’

‘Well, after all, like most companies, he has to face competition, so naturally he doesn’t want other air transport concerns to know what he’s doing. He gets the business, that’s all that matters. How he gets it is no concern of mine. I hope he goes on getting it, because if he stops I shall have to start looking for another job.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed Biggles. ‘I don’t want to appear inquisitive, but I haven’t been told much, so you can’t blame me for trying to get my clock set right. I like to know what I’m doing.’

‘Well, one of the rules here is you don’t talk about what you’re doing, even if you know. You get your orders and that’s it. If you don’t know anything you can’t yap about it. It’s natural that the Count should keep the soft pedal on the stuff he handles. If he didn’t the customers would take a poor view of it.’

‘How long have you been here?’

‘About three months.’

‘What machines do you fly?’

‘At present we’re working a couple of Constellations.’

‘Where did they come from?’

‘The United States.’

‘Expensive stuff.’

‘They weren’t bought brand-new. They were on a list for disposal by one of the American airlines who were replacing their fleet with newer, bigger and faster types. The Count probably got ‘em cheap. They’re in perfect order, so you needn’t worry about that.’

‘Where are they registered?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never asked. Nothing to do with me. They still carry the original markings. The Count is always saying he’ll have them painted out and new ones put on; but he hasn’t done so yet.’

Before Biggles could say more there was a noise outside as if a heavy vehicle had pulled up. Voices spoke loudly in a foreign language.

After listening for a moment Biggles looked at Sandy. ‘What’s all that about?’

‘Sounds like another load of stuff arriving. That means there’ll be a job for somebody pretty soon. Probably Canson and Jumbo Brady as they’re next on the duty roster.’

‘How often do these trips come along?’

‘It varies. Fairly often, although we get quiet spells.’ Sandy got up. ‘Well, I’ll get along. Be seeing you.’ At the door he looked over his shoulder.

‘Watch out for Canson.’

‘Don’t worry. I will.’

Left alone, Biggles lit another cigarette and turned over in his mind what he had just learned. One thing he thought was significant. Sandy was of the opinion that some, if not all, of the stuff to be handled came from nearby Yugoslavia. A communist country. All the places he had named for delivery were either communist or dictator controlled countries. Perhaps, after all, it was natural for communist countries to have dealings with each other. The big question, still to be answered, was what were they buying and selling, or what was being given away free? Sandy had mentioned several items, all of which seemed reasonable. But he had admitted frankly that he had never seen the goods. The labels could mean nothing. He obviously believed them, having no reason to doubt them. Anyway, he didn't care what he carried.

Biggles was tempted to go outside to see what was going on, but he thought better of it, feeling that while curiosity might be pardonable, it might be indiscreet to show too much interest at this stage.

He was stubbing out his cigarette prior to getting into bed when the door was opened and the Count entered.

'Everything all right?' he inquired.

'Fine, as far as I'm concerned.'

The Count came in. 'Did I see young Sandy Grant just come out of here?'

'Yes, he's been in.'

'What did he want?'

'Nothing. He merely looked in to tell me we'd been paired off as co-pilots.'

'That's right. I was anxious to keep you and Canson apart until he's had time to cool down. I'm not always here, but I'll tell Miskoff, who takes charge in my absence, to organize that. He's away at the moment. You'll meet him when he gets back. Canson will be off early in the morning. We've just received a consignment of hardware for delivery in Africa, so Canson, with his usual partner, Brady, will be taking it on. It's most unfortunate that you should have met Canson before, in circumstances hardly conducive to good-fellowship.'

'I suppose there was always a risk of that sort of thing happening,' replied Biggles. He smiled faintly. 'I'm not implying that you go out of your way to employ pilots with a police record. After all, I've been meeting pilots of one sort or another for most of my life. They come in all types. The majority are sound, but there are some I wouldn't trust as far as I could see them.'

'Canson being one of them, eh?'

'You might say that. He's the type that can't go straight even when there's no reason to go crooked. If he's got a chip on his shoulder about me he has only himself to blame. He was in trouble in the R.A.F. before he... but let's not go into that. In the circumstances all I can say is, if our presence on the same aerodrome is going to cause you any embarrassment, I'm willing to pack up and go home.'

'There's no need for that,' the Count said quickly. 'Let's give it a trial. Things may work out all right. If not, I'm afraid one of you will have to go.'

I'd rather Canson went. I'm disturbed to find he has a police record. He said nothing to me about it. Had he done so I wouldn't have taken him on. If he gets into trouble now it would reflect on me. I would be asked, what was I doing to employ such a man?"

'Yes, I can see that,' agreed Biggles.

'Now I must be getting along,' concluded the Count. 'You won't be wanted tomorrow, so you can have an easy day. Good night.' He departed.

Biggles sat still, pondering what he had learned since his arrival. The Count's apparent frankness still puzzled him. He could well understand, whether his business was legitimate or otherwise, that he was not happy to learn that he had on his payroll a man with a police record. He was, Biggles felt sure, sincere about that. If anything went wrong it would look bad. A man who has been to prison is always suspect. Yet if he, the Count, felt like that about it, he had a simple remedy. All he had to do was tell Canson that his services were no longer required. Why didn't he do that? Was it because he daredn't? Did Canson know too much?

Biggles went to the window and moving aside the curtain peeped out. In the darkness he could not see much. He could just make out the bulk of a big covered lorry standing in front of a hangar. Cases were being unloaded and carried in. What was in them? The Count had said 'hardware', a broad term that might mean anything. If only, reflected Biggles, he knew what was in the cases, he would have all the answers. But he didn't know, and he could see no way of finding out without taking risks which at this juncture might have results fatal to his investigations — and perhaps himself.

These loads, Sandy had thought, were coming from Yugoslavia. It seemed probable. Why not? Yugoslavia was as anxious as any other country to export its products, so there was nothing wrong in that. Being close, with only one frontier to cross, it would be easy; provided the goods were ordinary merchandise. If they were not, then obviously there was something wrong somewhere. The Customs officials would have to know what was going on. Were they in the racket, if in fact there was one? Or had some member of one of the two governments concerned, Greece and Yugoslavia, made the necessary arrangement for the goods to go through unchecked? In other words, was the Count 'buying the road,' as such transactions are known in the Near East, to drug traffickers and the like?

Biggles gave it up, and feeling he had gathered as much information as he could digest for the moment, went to bed.

Some time later, at four o'clock in the morning by his watch, he was awakened by the roar of aero engines being started. Hurrying to the window he saw the bulk of a big aircraft taxiing to the end of the runway. He watched it turn and take off. So another load of something was on its way, he mused, as he returned to his bed.

At eight o'clock a Greek steward brought him an early morning cup of tea. Looking at Biggles questioningly he made curious signs over the cup with a

finger. Biggles asked him what he meant. The man did not answer. It took Biggles a couple of minutes to work out that the man was a deaf mute and this was his way of asking him if he wanted sugar in his tea.

Biggles dressed leisurely, went into the common-room and had a good breakfast. Sandy joined him, but the Count did not appear. So the day passed quietly, mostly in casual conversation with two or three pilots and a navigator who were not on duty. Biggles had a look round outside, but the scenery was not inspiring, consisting of gaunt hills with the herbage burnt brown by the summer sun. The open door of a hangar revealed a Constellation. There was no one with it. Eventually he went to bed a little disappointed that nothing of interest had occurred.

The following day passed in exactly the same way. He ventured to make a few discreet inquiries, but he learned nothing new. Nobody seemed to know where the Count was, or what he was doing. Miskoff, the Count's traffic manager, did not put in an appearance, either. Again he went to bed, wondering if he was wasting his time and somewhat bored by this unexpected inaction.

He was awakened at four in the morning by his light being switched on. Sandy stood there, fully dressed. 'On your feet, pal,' he said cheerfully. 'We're going places.'

'Going where?' asked Biggles, getting out of bed.

'Africa.'

'Africa is a big place.'

'The Sudd.'

Biggles stared. 'The *Sudd*! What the devil are we to do in that swamp?'

'Find Canson and Jumbo Brady. A radio message has come in to say they're down. The Count has rung up to say we're to find them and bring them home.'

'That's a tall order. What were they doing over the Sudd?'

'It's on our usual route to the Congo.'

'Queer way to go.'

'Safer than taking the direct line over the Sahara.'

'What are we going in?'

'The other Constellation. Don't ask questions now. Get a move on. Let's get off before the sun's up.' Sandy went out.

A few minutes later Biggles followed him.

CHAPTER 7

PLAIN SPEAKING

We now know why, and what, Biggles was doing in a Constellation aircraft over Central Africa.

We left him sitting on a tussock of grass in the Sudd, smoking a cigarette. Sandy Grant, his co-pilot, sat near him, thoughtfully chewing a piece of gum.

‘You said leave him alone and he might tell us something,’ he reminded, meaning of course the coloured pilot I’Nobo, who had shot them down. ‘What did he tell us?’

‘Plenty. Someone is handing out guns to a rebel army in the Congo.’

‘There’s nothing new about that. It’s common knowledge. It’s been in the newspapers.’

‘The stuff is being delivered by air and interceptors are being put up to put a stop to the racket.’

‘We discovered that for ourselves.’

‘You’ve missed the point, Sandy,’ went on Biggles, seriously. ‘That lad who shot us up wasn’t there by accident. He knew the route being used by the gun-runners. Don’t ask me to believe that he would have shot down any commercial machine that came along, possibly with a load of passengers. No. He knew very well the guns were being carried in a Constellation. How did he know? What is even more important, the Congolese government knew that another load was about due. How did they know that? That lad said they *had received information* to that effect. From whom did that information come?’

‘You tell me.’

‘I don’t know the answer, but it looks to me as if a spy is on the job.’

‘So what? What the deuce has it got to do with us? We’re not carrying guns.’

‘Maybe not, but it’s unfortunate that the Count happens to be using Constellations. We’re flying one ourselves. In future, any Constellation using this lump of sky is likely to be greeted by the music of machine-guns.’

Sandy spat out his gum. ‘Yeah!’ he agreed. ‘You’re right. I hadn’t looked at it like that.’

‘Well, you’d better start looking now, and looking hard. We’ve got to take this machine up again, and we may not be so lucky next time.’

‘The sooner the Count knows about this the better,’ Sandy said. ‘We’d better get off right away and head for home.’

‘Before we can do that we have a little job to do — unless you feel like packing it in.’

‘I’m not packing anything in. We’ll find Canson’s Constellation before we start for home. Let’s start looking for it.’

‘How?’

‘On our feet, I suppose.’

Biggles glanced at the sky. ‘This is no time to start on a walking tour of the Sudd. It’ll be dark inside an hour. If we were daft enough to get ourselves benighted in this bog we might never find our own machine again, never mind the other. In any case I think it would be a mistake to leave here. We’d do better to wait.’

‘Wait for what?’

‘For either Canson or Brady to come to us. Anyone within ten miles must have seen what happened up top-sides. They’d hear the gunfire and look up. They’d see us come down, so they must know roughly where we are. I’d say either Canson or Brady is on his way here now. They must be all right or they couldn’t have sent that radio signal. It’ll be interesting to know *why* they went down. They certainly wouldn’t land from choice, so it wouldn’t surprise me if our young coloured friend had something to do with it.’

‘If that’s right he would have mentioned it.’

‘Why should he? No doubt he’d report to his base what he’d done, but there was no reason why he should tell us. He might have done so had he known for certain that Canson’s machine was carrying arms. I imagine he doesn’t know what it was carrying. Which suggests no one yet has been able to get to it. He was obviously shaken to find we weren’t carrying anything. He changed his tune when he discovered his mistake. He’s probably wondering what we are doing in this part of Africa with an empty machine. Let’s hope he doesn’t guess the right answer.’

‘Well, what are we going to do?’ asked Sandy, impatiently. ‘You seem to have taken charge of the damn business. You tell me.’

‘I’m not taking charge, but since you ask me I’ll make a suggestion. Let’s wait here, anyway until the morning. That should give Canson time to get to us, if that’s what he decides to do. We don’t know where he is, but he must at least have a rough idea of where we are. For all he knows we may have crashed and been hurt. He wouldn’t push off leaving us here. I’ll tell you what. If he’s not here early in the morning we’ll try to get off and look for him.’

‘Okay. That makes sense.’

‘Meanwhile, as we’ve a little daylight left, it wouldn’t be a bad idea if we went over our machine to check if those bullets did us any serious damage. I don’t think they could have holed a tank or we’d be smelling petrol by now.’

‘Yes we’d better do that.’ Sandy got up.

An investigation of the Constellation revealed nothing more serious than a few holes through the tail unit; nothing likely to affect the machine’s performance or airworthiness. There was no smell of petrol to indicate a leaky tank.

‘We were lucky,’ remarked Biggles.

‘I reckon there was a bit more than luck,’ answered Sandy. ‘I could never have brought the old crate down the way you did.’

‘Just a matter of knowing how,’ returned Biggles. ‘You learn fast when someone is shooting at you, and you take chances you wouldn’t consider in cold blood.’

Satisfied with their inspection, and in the failing light unable to see to do more, they returned to their seats on the grass. The sultry atmosphere was now full of sounds; the hum of a myriad mosquitoes; the chirping of other insects; the croaking of frogs and the occasional cough of a crocodile.

‘I guess we’ll sleep in the cabin,’ Sandy said.

‘Might as well. If we sleep in the open, by the time the mosquitoes have finished with us we shan’t know ourselves in the morning.’ Biggles raised a hand. ‘What was that? Did you hear anything?’

‘I heard something. I thought it was an elephant, or a bird of some sort.’

‘Keep quiet. It sounded to me like someone calling.’

They sat still, listening. Presently the sound came again, now nearer, and there was no longer any doubt. It was a human voice, hailing.

Biggles sprang up. ‘That must be Canson or Brady looking for us. I can’t imagine it being anyone else.’ He let out a shout.

It was answered immediately. ‘Where are you?’ came faintly through the still air.

‘This way,’ returned Biggles. He continued to call from time to time.

‘Okay,’ came the voice, now close.

‘It’s Canson,’ said Sandy.

He was right. Presently Canson appeared, staggering out of a belt of reeds on the edge of open space. He was mud up to the waist and walked like a man at the end of his strength. Coming up he sank down and gave Biggles a hard look.

‘So it’s you,’ he observed. ‘I should have known it.’

‘Why?’

‘The way you brought that machine down.’

‘Don’t say you’re sorry to see me.’ Biggles offered a cigarette.

‘I’d have been glad to see the devil himself in this hellhole,’ declared Canson, accepting the smoke.

‘Sorry I can’t offer you a drink. Where’s Brady?’

‘He wasn’t back when I set out to look for you. Apparently he got a message home. At least, I can only imagine you were sent out to look for us, otherwise you wouldn’t be here.’

‘Correct. We were told to find you and bring you home — complete with your cargo.’

‘With cargo! That’s a joke. You haven’t a hope.’

‘Why?’

‘The machine is miles away and over its wheels in mud. The boss must be crazy. How the devil does he suppose we can transfer the cargo in this stinking swamp? It weighs a ton.’

‘Why did you come down?’

‘For the same reason as you. I was gunned down. I saw what happened to you. I was damn glad to get down anywhere, I don’t mind telling you, with that little swine trying to make a colander of me. I did my best. I picked what looked like a patch of nice short grass, but it was only skin deep over mud. With the load I had on board my wheels cut right through it. You were lucky to find hard ground.’

‘It wasn’t all luck,’ said Biggles. ‘I went for the elephants. I knew they’d be on firm ground. It happens I’ve been here before.’

‘Well, my machine’s had it. Is yours all right?’

‘As far as we can tell. We collected a few holes on the way down, but no great harm.’

‘Then there’s nothing to stop us going home.’

‘When we’ve collected Brady. I take it you expected him to come back to you?’

‘Of course. He said he’d get back as soon as he could. I’ve been expecting him for some time. I left a note to say what I was doing. I hope he hasn’t got drunk.’

‘Drunk? How?’

‘He took a bottle of whisky with him. He had a couple of bottles on board.’

‘Well, if he’s fool enough to drink himself silly on a spot like this that’s his look-out.’

‘Where did that little hound who shot us down come from — do you know?’

‘From the Congo. He said he was an officer of the Congolese Air Force.’

‘Then what was he doing here and what was his idea of shooting at us?’

‘He said he was looking for people running guns to the Congo rebels. They’d received word some were on the way.’

‘He *said* —’ Canson looked astonished.

‘That’s what he told us. He landed here beside us to arrest us and seize our cargo. As it happened we were flying empty, without even any luggage, looking for you.’

‘— that for a tale. What was he doing here? This isn’t the Congo.’

‘That’s what I told him. He said it was near enough. He was an enthusiastic black boy who apparently was flat out to try his guns on anybody, anywhere.’ Biggles smiled. ‘He apologized for what he’d done and departed.’

‘I should think he damn well did,’ burst out Canson indignantly.

‘A sticky point arises out of all this,’ went on Biggles. ‘This is going to be a dangerous spot for flying machines, whether or not they’re carrying weapons of war.’ He gave Canson a searching look. ‘I hope you aren’t carrying guns.’

‘Me! Don’t be silly. What gave you the idea that I might be?’

‘I didn’t say that. It’s pretty obvious that somebody is. It struck me that if you happened to have any guns on board, it might be as well to get out of this as fast as we can.’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘Well, it seems that these Congolese types aren’t particular as to whose territory they step on. That flying officer was flying a modern aircraft. It will be equipped with radio. If he reports to his base, as I imagine he will, that he shot down two machines but only examined one, a search party might be sent along to have a look at the other. That is, yours. I’Nobo checked ours.’

‘I see what you mean. Well, we’ve nothing to worry about on that score. All I’m carrying is a load of farm machinery.’

‘What sort of machinery?’

‘I don’t know. That’s all I was told.’

‘You were taking it to the Congo?’

‘Yes. If this is the sort of reception we’re going to get I shall think twice before hauling another load. If it wasn’t for Jumbo Brady I’d say let’s get out of this cursed swamp and go home to let the Count know what’s going on here.’

‘Obviously we can’t just push off leaving Brady here. Someone will have to go back to your machine and bring him here. Maybe we’d better all go. It might be possible to salvage some of your cargo at the same time.’

‘Forget it. You may feel like humping a load on your back for miles, but not me. I wasn’t employed as a navy.’

‘How far away is your machine, for a guess?’

‘As the crow flies, four or five miles. But you can’t cross this country as the crow flies. What with lakes and bogs and thorn bushes and rushes twelve feet high, you have to wander all over the place picking your way. I reckon I must have covered nearer ten miles. Not being able to see where I was going I couldn’t keep a straight line, anyway. More than once I came to a dead end and had to go back. If I hadn’t had the luck to strike an elephant trail which ran in this direction I doubt if I’d ever have got here.’

‘How is this cargo of yours packed?’

‘In wooden cases. There are six, three large and three smaller ones. I reckon none of ‘em weighs less than a hundred pounds. It needed half a dozen men to get the cases on board one at a time — and we had tackle to do it.’

‘We might break open the cases and shift the stuff a little at a time.’

‘Good heavens, man, you must be crazy,’ cried Canson. ‘How long do you think that would take? Weeks. In fact, you’d kill yourself trying to do it. With that load on board it wasn’t surprising that my wheels cut through the turf.’

‘Do you feel like going home and telling the Count we abandoned stuff worth a lot of money?’

Canson did not answer.

‘You’re sure there’s no chance of getting your machine off the ground? The Count won’t be pleased at losing that, either.’

‘Absolutely certain. She’s stuck where she is for good.’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that,’ returned Biggles. ‘I once made a little money by getting out a bogged aircraft. But that’s another story. I’ll tell you

about it sometime. Well, there's nothing we can do till it gets daylight. I take it you'll spend the night here with us, Canson?

'I'd be stark raving mad to try to get back to my own machine in the dark. It was bad enough trying to get here to you in daylight.'

'In that case we might as well turn in.'

'How do you go for grub? Did you bring any with you?'

'Only a few sandwiches and we'd eaten those before we came down.'

'Not expecting anything like this we didn't bring anything, either. A few biscuits, and I gave those to Brady when he started to look for help. Have you anything to drink?'

'A few bottles of soda water.'

'Strewth! What a party,' muttered Canson. 'Still, soda water is better than the stagnant muck you find in the puddles here.'

'Come in and I'll give you a bottle,' said Biggles, getting up.

'You say we'll all go to my machine tomorrow?'

'As soon as it gets light enough to see what we're doing.'

'What about this machine? Will it be all right left here?'

'I don't see why not. It's been given the once over, so there's no reason for anyone to come here. With yours it's different.'

'They're welcome to any guns they find in mine,' stated Canson, cogently.

'You're quite sure about that?'

Canson stared. 'What the heck are you getting at? I've told you what I'm loaded with, haven't I?'

'You've told me what you *think* you're loaded with; but you haven't seen inside the cases.'

Canson raised his voice. 'What a suspicious devil you are!'

'It seems to me there's reason to be suspicious.'

'Why?'

'I'm always suspicious of coincidences. Here we have them. The Congolese government knew guns were being flown in. They knew another load was due. They knew it was being carried in a Constellation. They were all set waiting for one to appear. One turns up — yours. They didn't hesitate to shoot it down. They must have been sure of their ground. They wouldn't have risked shooting at anything other than a Constellation. Add that lot up and draw your own conclusions.'

'How could they know all this?'

'Obviously, someone in our organization spilled the beans. Or as it was put to us, the Congo people were *informed*. Seriously, Canson, I hope I'm wrong; but if those cases of yours were found to be packed with weapons, we'd all be on an ugly spot. Anything could happen to us here and the outside world would never know anything about it.'

'Give me that bottle of soda water,' said Canson, grimly. 'You can't frighten me. We don't talk on the same wave-length.'

'I realized that some time ago,' returned Biggles, curtly.

‘If any nigger tries any funny stuff with me he’ll get this,’ stated Canson, showing a small automatic.

Biggles glanced at it. ‘Your trouble is you’re a bit out of date,’ he said. ‘That sort of thing might have worked fifty years ago, but it won’t work today. This is the black man’s country and he can do what he likes; and he knows it. But let’s not argue. Brady isn’t likely to turn up here tonight, so we might as well turn in.’

CHAPTER 8

A QUEER BUSINESS

After an uncomfortable night, during which Biggles spent more time thinking than sleeping, dawn saw the party on its way — with nothing more substantial for breakfast than a small bottle of soda water apiece — to the other Constellation.

There was little talking, probably because everything that could be said about the situation had already been said. Biggles remained silent, aware that conversation would lead to argument; nothing was to be gained by quarrelling at this stage. Their position was difficult enough without complicating matters by falling out among themselves.

Canson, already having been over the ground, took the lead as guide; and it was soon evident that what he had said about the state of the going had not been exaggerated. This came as no surprise to Biggles who had had previous experience of the country in which they were grounded. In the early days of flying, when aero engines were less reliable, the Sudd had always been regarded as a hazard by pilots flying to South Africa.

Now at the end of the rainy season in the distant mountains, where the water had its source, the ground was so soft that at the best they were ankle deep in slush. There were wide areas of sheer bog around which they had to find a way. Any low-lying ground was occupied by pools of black, stagnant water, the home of countless wading birds, storks, flamingoes and the like. Always the view was restricted by tall reeds, scrub or elephant grass, so that it was practically impossible to keep a straight line of march. The elephant track that Canson had mentioned, when they reached it, made the going easier, the animals, from instinct or experience, keeping to reasonably firm ground. They saw no elephants, but there was an uncomfortable moment when they encountered a solitary old bull buffalo coming the other way. However, apparently he was not in an aggressive mood, for with a snort he turned aside and crashed off into the reeds.

To make a long story short it took them nearly three hours of heavy going to reach Canson's Constellation. Its wheels had torn a long deep track in the soft earth before the machine, losing speed, had been brought to a stop by its weight breaking through the layer of crust, grass and coarse herbage, that had formed over the waterlogged subsoil. Biggles had to admit that Canson's mistake in landing there was understandable, for generally speaking the area was fairly open and from the air must have looked like grass.

There was no one in sight. Canson shouted 'Jumbo, are you there?' There was no answer. 'So he still isn't back,' he said. 'What the devil can he be doing?'

'I could think of several answers to that question,' replied Biggles. 'He

may have been unable to find his way back. He might be miles away, completely lost. That's easy in the Sudd. He may have fallen sick, which can easily happen here for several reasons. He may have put his foot on a snake, or maybe—'

'Maybe what?'

'He was prevented from coming back.'

'By whom?'

'The people who were responsible for us being here. The pilot who forced you down would mark the spot and pass on the information to a ground force if he was in touch with one, as I imagine he would be.'

'Why do you always go out of your way to look for trouble?' complained Canson. 'They shot me down. What more do they want?'

'It's likely they'd want to have a look at what you had on board. The lad who had a crack at me was soon down, at some risk, to see what I was carrying. A search-party might be on its way here with the same operation in view.'

'They're welcome to all the contraband they find here,' declared Canson. 'Like I told you, farm tackle is all I've got.'

'In that case we've nothing much to worry about. Suppose we have a look at it, to make sure.'

'Go ahead. Help yourself.'

'By the way, did you before you left the machine examine it for any damage done by bullets?'

'Of course. That's the first thing I did when I was on the carpet. I couldn't find anything serious.'

'Good.'

Canson climbed into the cabin, the others following. As in the case of the other Constellation, most of the seats had been removed to provide more room for freight and make it easier to handle. After a glance at the wooden packing-cases, distributed to spread the weight, pointing to a heap of parachutes, Biggles exclaimed: 'What were they for?'

Canson answered. 'To drop the stuff.'

'Drop it?'

'That's what I said. You can see a hook on each case. All we have to do is attach a brolly and push it overboard. It's as easy as that.'

Biggles stared. His astonishment was genuine and he did not attempt to disguise it. 'But why drop it? What's wrong with landing it?'

'We can't, for the simple reason there's no aerodrome at Carisville. That's where the stuff is needed. It's only a small place. A dropping area has been marked out, with a smoke smudge, so all we have to do is unload without going too low.'

'Why not put the stuff down where there is an aerodrome?'

That would mean it would have to be manhandled all the way to where it was wanted. The Congo covers a lot of ground and much of it is still wild,

without roads, only river transport.'

'It seems a queer business to me. Who organized this?'

'I don't know. Miskoff gives the orders. Are you still sweating for fear there might be guns in those cases?'

'I am.' Biggles admitted.

'Why? Afraid some of the blacks might hurt each other? Forget it. I'm not worried.'

'You should be,' Biggles said shortly. 'If the contents of these cases *should* turn out to be guns, and we were found with them, it would be just too bad for us, never mind the natives. It wouldn't matter who found them, Congolese troops or Sudanese, it would come to the same thing. I don't want to see the inside of a native gaol. Put it like this. If these cases do in fact carry agricultural implements, or spare parts, okay. There wouldn't be any trouble and we could take our time here no matter who came along. But if by some chance a few guns had been put in, the sooner we're away from here the better. You please yourself what you do, but that's how I feel about it. Guns are getting into the Congo. The government knows it and, not without reason, believes us, rightly or wrongly, to be responsible. That's the fact of the matter.'

'But who would put guns in the cases?'

'I wouldn't know. But that's beside the point. It doesn't matter who put them in, if there are any.'

Canson was looking concerned. 'What makes you think there may be guns?'

'For one thing, the way the cases are being delivered. I didn't know anything about that until you told me. You must admit it's unusual, to say the least.'

Canson shrugged. 'If you feel like that about it why not open one of the cases and have a look inside?'

'I think that would be a good idea,' Biggles said slowly.

'The Count won't be pleased when he hears about it.'

'He isn't here. Whatever happens to us, he's sitting pretty in Greece. We've been warned that we can expect no help from him should anything go wrong. If we're caught running guns we take the rap.'

Looking at Biggles Canson said: 'If we did find guns in these cases what would you do with 'em?'

'Get rid of 'em; either that or make for home. But why bring that up until we know? Fetch some tools. We'll soon settle the matter. It shouldn't take long to prise one of these cases open. They look pretty flimsy.'

'The stuff's packed light to save weight. Not being anything fragile it couldn't take any harm by being dropped.'

Biggles shook his head. 'It seems a funny business to me.'

Canson fetched a screwdriver and a light cold chisel from the forward locker and between them, with a little difficulty, they managed to lift the nails

and pull up two of the thin deal boards. This disclosed a tightly packed mass of straw.

‘Help yourself,’ invited Canson. ‘Then I hope you’ll be satisfied. You can repack the crate when you’ve finished.’

Biggles thrust a hand into the straw, groping. His hand closed on something. He dragged the object out. It was a modern, brand-new automatic rifle, greasy with oil. He laid it on the case. His eyes went to Canson’s face.

‘This doesn’t look like farm machinery to me,’ he said quietly.

There was a silence that lasted for perhaps five seconds.

Sandy broke it by bursting out laughing.

‘By gosh! You were right,’ said Canson in a strained voice. ‘How do you do it? You must be a ruddy wizard.’

CHAPTER 9

PROBLEMS

With the rifle lying on the case between them Biggles looked Canson straight in the eyes. 'Did you know anything about this?' he inquired in a brittle voice.

'No, and that's God's truth if I never move from here.'

Biggles' eyes switched to Sandy, who was still grinning. 'How about you?'

'Having no reason to disbelieve the boss, I took his word for what we were carrying. I knew nothing about guns. Not that it would have made any difference if I had.'

'You seem to find this amusing.'

'I was laughing at Canson's expression.'

'You say it would have made no difference had you known what was in these cases?'

'Why should it?'

'You realize that these rifles are being dished out to enable ignorant people to kill each other?'

'Who cares? They'd probably murder each other, anyway, using more painful weapons such as poisoned arrows. Native tribes, everywhere, have always fought each other. In America the Red Indians, the Comanches, the Choctaws, the Iroquois, Seminole, Pawnees, and all the rest of 'em, were for ever trying to wipe each other out. Maybe they had nothing else to do. We — that is, the white men — put an end to that nonsense.'

'Well, you won't stop African negroes from killing each other by giving 'em guns,' retorted Biggles.

'If they want to bump off each other what does it matter how they do it?'

'Before we gave the poor devils high explosives, at least they didn't blind and mutilate each other. I've been around quite a bit and I've never had any trouble with them.'

Canson broke in. 'For crying out loud! What is all this? Are you the black man's Great White Friend, or something? If they choose to shoot each other what the heck does it matter?'

'Maybe it wouldn't matter if they had any reason for doing it. Although they may not realize it, they're merely the tools of certain European powers who, by causing trouble, are hoping to muscle in on anything the country has worth having.'

'You talk like a book,' sneered Canson. 'You're in the wrong job. You should have been a missionary.'

'Maybe I should,' returned Biggles coldly. 'You don't seem to mind playing into the hands of enemies of your own country. Well, I do.'

Sandy spoke. 'Quit stalling, you two,' he said impatiently. 'Arguing the

tooss won't get us anywhere. What are we going to do? That's what I want to know.'

'We shall have to wait a bit longer for Jumbo,' Canson said.

'He may never come. Do we have to squat here till we starve to death. What do you think, Bigglesworth?'

'Since you ask me, I'd say the first thing to do is get rid of this stuff.'

Biggles indicated the cases.

'Why do we have to bother to do that?'

'I've told you. If we're caught with it we're not likely to go anywhere. Let's get rid of it. Then, as soon as Brady comes, we'll go home and let the Count know what's happened.'

'You're not suggesting that we hump this stuff to the other machine?'

'Of course not. That's out of the question.'

'This machine won't fly again.'

'Never mind that. There's nothing to stop us unpacking these cases and hiding the guns somewhere, not too far away. Then we burn the packing. After that, while we're waiting for Brady, if anyone should come along we'd be in the clear. There'd be no evidence that we were carrying anything.'

'Hide the stuff? Where?'

'I noticed a thick clump of tamarisks not far away. We could dump it in there and cover it with reeds or anything else that's to hand. It's likely these small cases only hold ammunition for the guns.'

'I don't see the point of going to all this sweat,' grumbled Canson.

'You asked for my opinion and you've got it. Having got rid of the evidence of what we were doing, we could think about saving the machine.'

'This machine!'

'Yes.'

'Are you out of your mind? She's stuck, and she'll stay here till she rots.'

'You may be right, but not necessarily.'

'Ah! So you can work miracles as well as your other accomplishments.'

'It wouldn't be the first time I'd salvaged a machine in the Sudd,' went on Biggles, ignoring Canson's remark. 'Years ago a fellow trying to break the record to the Cape in a Dragon, ran out of petrol, went down in the Sudd and abandoned his aircraft. When I met him later he had collected the insurance, the Dragon being thought a write-off. He told me where it was. It happened I knew conditions here, so I bought the salvage from the insurance people for a song — ten pounds, to be exact. With a friend and a couple of spades we went out and had a look at the Dragon. No one had been near it. As I expected, the ground had dried out. It took us an hour to dig the dry mud from the wheels. I flew one machine home and my pal flew the other. We sold the Dragon to a flying club for seven hundred pounds, which, after paying expenses, showed a profit of six hundred.'

'Nice work,' congratulated Sandy, smiling.

'You think we could do that with this machine?' queried Canson.

‘I don’t see why not. It would put us right with the Count if we could save the machine, never mind the guns.’

‘How long do you reckon it will take this ground to dry out?’

‘Two or three weeks. The rains have practically finished. Once they’ve stopped the sun won’t take long to do all that’s necessary.’

‘*Weeks!* It’s an idea,’ admitted Canson, ‘but it won’t work. We’ve no spades and we couldn’t wait here for weeks if we had. You seem to have forgotten that we have to eat.’

‘No, I hadn’t forgotten that,’ resumed Biggles. ‘I didn’t mean we stayed here. My suggestion is, as soon as we’ve got rid of these cases — and they’d have to be unloaded anyway before we could hope to get the machine off the ground — we go home in the other Constellation. If by the time we’ve hidden this dangerous cargo Brady hasn’t turned up, we can assume he won’t be coming. We may find out later what happened to him.’

‘Okay, let’s do that,’ said Sandy, briskly. ‘Let’s do something, anyhow, rather than sit here and yap. I’m getting hungry. Isn’t there anything at all to eat in this confounded place?’

‘Not unless you fancy an elephant steak, although with only a pistol you may have a job to get one,’ Biggles told him. ‘Or you might try a slice of crocodile tail. I’ve never had it myself, but it’s said to be quite tasty.’

‘Never mind trying to be funny,’ broke in Canson, curtly. ‘I’ve had about enough of this, so I don’t feel like playing games with elephants or crocodiles. Let’s get on with it. It’s a pity we didn’t know what we were carrying. If we had, we’d have known better what to do in an emergency like this.’

Biggles agreed. ‘Apparently the Count doesn’t altogether trust the people who work for him,’ he remarked.

The work began. Although the tamarisks to which Biggles had referred were only a couple of hundred yards away, unpacking the guns and carrying them over the soft ground in the humid heat proved to be hard labour. It was not made easier by having to go a different way every time, this at Biggles’ suggestion in order to avoid leaving a tell-tale track should anyone come along. In fact, by the time the cases had all been unpacked, and their contents as well as the parachutes transported to the trees, and the packing materials burnt, the sun was fast dropping into the horizon.

Not until then did they sink down wearily to rest, mopping their sweat-streaming faces, Canson grumbling that all this trouble would probably turn out to have been a waste of time and energy.

‘You could be right,’ conceded Biggles, lighting one of his few remaining cigarettes. ‘I hope you are, because that’ll suit me.’

‘If it wasn’t for that fool Brady we could have been on our way home by now.’

‘We couldn’t push off leaving him here,’ Biggles pointed out. ‘After all, he did what he went to do. He got a message through to base. Walking miles through this morass could have been no joke. He’d take a dim view if he came

back and found we'd gone. I wouldn't blame him for being a long time until we know the reason why. No doubt he has one.'

At this moment a distant gunshot brought everyone to his feet.

'Who the devil can that be?' said Canson tersely.

Sandy answered. 'It's my guess it's Jumbo, lost his way and is looking for us.' He took out his pistol.

'What are you going to do with that?' asked Biggles.

'Fire an answering shot to let him know where we are, of course.'

'I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry,' advised Biggles. 'Better wait and make sure it is Jumbo.'

'Who else could it be?'

'Possibly a gang of poaching elephant hunters. They could be rough customers. There are elephants about. Someone may have had a shot at one. That wouldn't be Jumbo. He wouldn't waste his time shooting elephants.'

There was a crashing in the reeds on the far side of the open ground. A young buffalo burst out and ran on blindly, stumbling. It was coughing frothy blood. Taking no notice of the plane or the men standing by it, it blundered on to disappear in another belt of reeds.

'So that was the target,' said Biggles. 'Someone shot at that beast and hit it. It looked as if it was struck in the lungs. It won't get far.' He looked at Sandy. 'You may get a beef steak to help you along, after all. That's what somebody else was after, I imagine.'

'Who?' questioned Canson.

'No use asking me. I can't see any farther than you can. Sandy, if you get up on the plane you'll get a wider view. You may be able to see the bloke who's doing a little private shooting. It's likely he'll come this way, following up the buffalo. Losing all that blood, it must have left a trail plain enough for anyone to follow.'

Sandy climbed up on the plane. He looked long and hard, this way and that, his eyes searching the monotonous landscape. Suddenly, after standing rigid for a moment, he dropped flat. From that position he scrambled down. His expression had changed. It was now one of alarm.

'What is it?' asked Biggles quickly.

'There's a party of men coming this way,' announced Sandy breathlessly. 'Blacks?'

'Yes. I can only see their heads above the rushes, but they seem to be in some sort of uniform.'

'That's just dandy,' observed Biggles calmly. 'Maybe that's the answer to why Jumbo hasn't come back. How far away do you reckon they are?'

'Less than a mile.'

'What are we going to do?' put in Canson, anxiously.

'What can we do except stay where we are?' answered Biggles.

'We could beat it to the other machine.'

'If you fancy your chance of getting to our Constellation go ahead and try

it. It's nearly dark now. You know what it was like getting here. Imagine what it would be like after the light's gone. You wander into one of those bogs and no one will ever see you again. You please yourself, but I'm staying here, come what may.'

Canson sat down. 'You're right,' he growled. 'You always are, dammit,' he added viciously.

'That may be lucky for you,' returned Biggles evenly, dropping his cigarette end and putting a foot on it. 'Sandy, it might be a good idea if you got back on the plane to keep an eye on these people; watch which way they're going.'

'I'll do that,' said Sandy, getting up.

'Keep your head down. We don't want them to see where we are if it can be prevented.'

Sandy proceeded with his task. Lying flat on the top of the plane he said: 'I can't see much; it's very nearly dark.'

'Can you still see them?'

'Yes, but only just.'

'What are they doing?'

'As far as I can make out they appear to have stopped.'

'They may have struck a patch of dry ground and decided to camp for the night. They won't fancy groping about in the dark any more than we do.'

'I think you're right,' said Sandy, peering into the gloom. 'I can see a light as if they've started a fire.'

Sandy remained on his perch for another five minutes; then he dropped off and rejoined the others. 'No use,' he said. 'The light's gone. Can't see a thing. Now what do we do?'

'I'd say try to get some sleep. We should be all right till the morning. Then, if they find us — well, they find us; that's all there is to it.'

'You think they're looking for us?'

'I think it's more than likely. I can't imagine what else men in uniform could be doing here. They may not find us. This is no place to look for anything, even a thing the size of a plane. I'm glad we got rid of those guns when we did. If they don't find them they'll have nothing on us.'

'I've been thinking about that,' Canson said. 'The Count did the dirty on us. He knew very well what was in those cases.'

'The probability is you're right, but we've no proof of it,' replied Biggles thoughtfully. 'On circumstantial evidence, yes, but that isn't always to be trusted. For all we know, someone may have been leading *him* up the garden path. I gather the cases were never unpacked at Noriovika, so he couldn't have known for certain what was inside 'em. That being so he'd have to take the word of the people who hired him to fly the stuff on to its final destination.'

'Pah!' sneered Canson. 'Don't give me that. He knew what was going on. He should have told us.'

‘I can’t see that it matters,’ put in Sandy.

‘Doesn’t it?’ answered Biggles. ‘You may change your mind about that in the morning if those guns are found. It wouldn’t be much use pleading ignorance, saying we knew nothing about them. There’s only one way they could have got here and that’s in this plane,’ Biggles went on. ‘I think you’re both forgetting something.’

‘Forgetting what?’

‘The Congolese government was tipped off that a load of guns was coming this way in a Constellation. That fellow I’Nobo told us so, and he had no reason to lie. Who gave the government the tip? I don’t know, but I can tell you who it wasn’t.’

‘Who was that?’

‘The Count — anyway, not if he knew he was shipping guns. He would hardly be such an idiot as to ruin himself financially. This spot of bother looks like costing him thirty or forty thousand pounds worth of aeroplane — at the very least.’

Canson and Sandy were staring. ‘I guess you’re right,’ murmured Sandy. ‘I didn’t look at it like that.’

‘Well, have a good look at it now, because if those troops are looking for us, and they find those guns, we’re up the creek without a paddle.’ Biggles got up. ‘I’m going to turn in before I talk myself hoarse.’

CHAPTER 10

ABANDONED

Biggles passed another uneasy night.

The situation that had arisen could not by any stretch of the imagination have been foreseen. In a way he had succeeded, and succeeded far more easily than he would have thought possible, in his purpose of finding out how weapons were reaching recalcitrant tribesmen. He even knew the men delivering them, the organization that employed them and the aircraft being used. He had flown in one of them. He had actually seen the guns, so this was a fact beyond dispute. Even so there was still a tangled skein to be unravelled. There was still no proof of the identity of the man primarily responsible for the shipment of arms, or who was paying for them.

The ironic thing about the whole business was, not only was he personally involved in the traffic and, if caught at it, would have to pay the penalty, but he had no means of passing on to his headquarters at home the information he had obtained. He was, he perceived, facing serious danger from two directions: on the one side the Congolese authorities, and on the other the men with whom he was working. He had talked about a spy being in their camp, but if they realized he was one they would assume him to be the informer who had been responsible for their present troubles. If once they suspected that, anything could happen. Up to now apparently the possibility had not occurred to them. There had been no reason why it should.

There was one way out of the trap which he did not overlook. There was nothing to prevent him from slipping away quietly while the others were asleep and at the first streak of dawn make a run for his own Constellation. He could take it off, as he was confident he could, and fly home; fly anywhere that suited him; perhaps to some aerodrome from where he could make contact with Air Commodore Raymond at the Yard and tell him what he knew.

He did not seriously consider this. He could not bring himself to abandon his companions in a situation that might be more dangerous than they yet realized. It would look too much like rank cowardice; and treachery. There had never been any love lost between him and Canson, and in view of what had happened in the past there never would be; but there was a wide gap between open hostility and betrayal; for that is what it would look like if he left them with no means of getting away.

Then there was Sandy. If he was caught he might be shot. In the short time he had known him he had come to like him, tough though he was — or pretended to be. He had not knowingly done anything criminal. Even if he had known he was carrying guns — and Biggles was certain he had not — how far this was on the wrong side of the law was a matter of opinion; a matter for

an international court to decide should it ever come to that. Sandy had made it clear that as far as he was concerned, although gun-running might be considered anti-social behaviour, it was not breaking any law.

Another factor that deterred Biggles from making off by himself was, he had not yet completed his assignment. There was still more to be learned; more evidence to be gathered.

There was, he felt, one redeeming feature in the affair. Sandy had had no idea of what was in the cases. It obviously hadn't occurred to him to question what he had been told about the contents. Whatever he might say, what he was doing was being done in ignorance.

Of Canson, Biggles was not so sure; but unless he was a superb actor he, too, was in the clear. His astonishment when Biggles pulled the rifle out of the case, like a conjurer lifting a rabbit from a hat, was too genuine to be faked. He was, or pretended to be, irate, that the Count had not told his pilots what they were really doing.

As for the Count, it began to look as if he may not have known what was in the cases, or he would hardly have risked losing two valuable aeroplanes. Was he, too, being deceived? Someone certainly knew about the guns. One person who must have known about them was the informer who had tipped off the Congolese government, which had resulted in the present situation. Who was it? Canson and Sandy could be ruled out, for it stood to reason that had they known they were likely to be intercepted by fighter aircraft prepared to use their guns, they would not have risked being shot down. The whole business seemed to bristle with spies, lies and deception.

Biggles gave it up and presently, worn out mentally and physically, dropped off to sleep.

As so often happens after a restless night, towards dawn he fell into a heavy sleep, and only awoke, to find it broad daylight, when Sandy nudged him with his foot.

'On your feet, pal,' requested Sandy. 'You're burning daylight.'

Biggles was quickly on his feet. 'Why didn't you wake me earlier? How long have you been up?'

'Some time. You looked dead to the world, so I left you alone while I went out to look for Canson.'

'Why look for him? Isn't he here?'

'If he is, I can't find him. I've called and whistled but got no answer.'

Biggles was staring at the speaker. 'You don't tell me!'

'I am telling you. I don't know what he's doing unless he's gone to hack some meat off that buffalo. He must have left some time ago, because when I woke up about five he wasn't here then.'

Biggles straightened his crumpled clothes and getting out of the plane sat on his favourite tussock of grass. With slow deliberation he lit a cigarette.

'What do you make of it?' queried Sandy, looking puzzled.

'I'm afraid there's only one answer to that. He's gone.'

‘Gone! Gone where?’

‘Home. Where else would he go?’

‘You mean he’s just pushed off, leaving us here?’

‘That’s what it looks like to me.’

‘I’ll not believe it,’ declared Sandy. ‘He wouldn’t pull a dirty trick like that!’

‘Wouldn’t he? You don’t know Canson. He’s been pulling dirty tricks all his life. His last employer committed suicide when Canson pushed off leaving him to face the music.’¹

Sandy looked shocked, as he had every reason to be. ‘I can’t believe it. Which way do you think he’d go?’

‘He’ll have made for our Constellation, where else? That’d be the quickest way out of this swamp. It might be the only way.’

‘But why? Why did he go?’

‘It’s my guess he smelt trouble on the way in the shape of those troops you saw last night; so he decided to save himself by taking the easiest way out. I hope I’m not doing him an injustice, but knowing Canson that’s how I see it.’

‘Then let’s go after him!’

Biggles shook his head. ‘Not a hope. He’s got too long a lead. We don’t know what time he left here, but if he wasn’t here at five o’clock he must have left before then. He must be nearly there by now. We shall soon know if I’m right because we shall hear the machine take off; perhaps even see it.’

‘What are we going to do? We can’t just sit here. If like you say there’s nothing to eat in the place we shall soon be starving.’

‘For a start we might try to find that buffalo. It must have been dead for hours, and from the blood it was losing we should have no difficulty in following its spoor. Buffalo is tough chewing, but at least it would keep us alive for a while. We might dry some strips of meat to take with us, to keep us going.’

‘Going where?’

‘Out of the Sudd. If we head west sooner or later we shall come to a track, if not a road, running north and south. Nothing, as far as I know, crosses the Sudd from east to west. We haven’t a map, but I’ve seen one, and I’ve flown over this country before. But we may have no choice in the matter. Tell me this. Have you been up on the plane to see what those troops are doing?’

‘Of course. First thing I did when it was light enough to see.’

‘Well?’

‘They’ve gone. At all events, I couldn’t see a sign of them. They weren’t where I last saw them. Of course, as it was early they might still have been lying down. I wouldn’t know about that.’

‘Could be they’re still looking for us. Anyway, it’s a relief to know they aren’t coming this way, because—’ Biggles broke off and held up a hand.

‘Listen!’

From a long way off, but clear in the humid, windless atmosphere, came

the sound of high-powered aero engines started up. The sound increased in volume, rose to a crescendo. Biggles and Sandy were both on their feet staring in the direction whence it came.

Sandy thrust forward a pointing finger. 'There he goes!'

'I can see him,' said Biggles.

Sandy broke into a torrent of bitter invective. 'The dirty rat! The yellow skunk. Never mind us, what about his partner? Jumbo. We can all go to hell as long as he saves his stinking hide. If ever I catch up with him again I'll—' He broke off, choking with anger.

'Storming won't stop him,' said Biggles calmly. 'He's away. You might as well save your breath for all the good cursing will do.'

'The dirty crook,' spat Sandy.

'He doesn't see it like that. He thinks he's being smart. That's the way he is. He's probably laughing like a cupboard, imagining us standing here like the Babes in the Wood.'

Breathing with difficulty, his face white with passion, Sandy looked at Biggles. 'When I get my hands on him I'll tear his hide off,' he swore through his teeth.

Biggles was still staring at the sky, a curious expression on his face. 'You may never get the chance,' he said grimly. 'I have a feeling something's going to happen. Look!' He pointed.

'Look at what?'

'Canson seems to have picked up an escort.'

Sandy looked. He didn't speak.

The Constellation had climbed steeply in a wide circuit to perhaps four or five thousand feet. It brought him almost over the spot where Biggles and Sandy stood by the other Constellation, watching.

'He's probably come round this way to wave goodbye to us,' Biggles said. 'That'd be his idea of a joke. He hasn't yet seen what's behind him.'

Above and behind Canson as he now straightened out and headed north another machine had appeared. It was a very small one. Compared with the Constellation it was as a gnat is to a bumble-bee.

'Who do you suppose is flying that other machine?' asked Sandy.

'I'd say that coloured lad, I'Nobo.'

'What's he going to do?'

'That's what I'm watching to see. He can't be keeping Canson company just for fun.'

Biggles and Sandy stood motionless, waiting, watching. They saw the smaller aircraft line up behind the larger one and put its nose in a dive. Seconds later, faintly to their ears came the staccato chatter of machine-guns. The Constellation swerved. But if by this its pilot hoped to shake off the attentions of its attacker, he must have been more optimistic than intelligent. Not that there was much else he could do. The Constellation was not designed for aerobatics or with manoeuvrability its chief feature. The fighter remained

on its tail as if attached by an invisible line. Again came the rattle of machine-guns.

‘If Canson continues to fly straight he’s had it,’ observed Biggles. ‘That’s if the fighter really means business.’

A moment later came the end, or the beginning of the end. A streamer of smoke or petrol vapour appeared behind the Constellation. Quickly it became thicker.

‘That’s it,’ said Biggles, in a tone of finality. ‘One spark now and it’s all over.’

‘You’ve seen it before,’ Sandy said in a taut voice.

‘Too often. And it never gets any prettier.’

As he spoke a tiny tongue of flame licked along the side of the Constellation. Then came a burst of fire as the trail of petrol vapour exploded. The Constellation wallowed. Its nose went down. It plunged earthwards like a blazing torch leaving a black plume to mark its passage.

‘Oh my God!’ whispered Sandy, putting his hands over his eyes. ‘How awful. I can’t look at it.’

Biggles watched dispassionately. As he said, he had seen it all before.

The crash, like the fall of a great tree, came clearly to their ears as the stricken machine went into the ground like a bomb.

‘All over,’ said Biggles softly, turning away.

Sandy removed his hands from his face and looked at where an oily cloud above the crash was rising sluggishly into the blue sky.

‘So Canson’s gone,’ he murmured. ‘What a way to end.’

‘A minute ago you were cursing him,’ reminded Biggles, dryly.

‘But I wouldn’t have wished him that.’

‘He asked for it. He pinched our machine. He didn’t care what happened to us. There’s such a thing as being a bit too smart. I’ve seen better men go out that way. I used up all my tears a long while ago.’

‘But why did that Negro pilot have to shoot him down? He knew the machine was empty.’

‘He did not. He may have thought it was *this* machine which had managed to get off. Or he may have thought it was a new arrival. He was acting under orders to see that no more Constellations got through to the Congo and he seems to be making a good job of it. You can’t blame him. After all, we *were* carrying guns.’

‘For heaven’s sake! Whose side are you on?’ demanded Sandy hotly.

‘I face the facts and try to be fair,’ retorted Biggles.

They both looked up as the sound of an aircraft approaching reached them.

‘He’s coming this way,’ observed Sandy. ‘Now what’s his game?’

‘He’s just spotted us and is coming over to have a look.’

‘I hope he’s satisfied with looking,’ muttered Sandy. ‘He may have the bright idea of sending this machine up in flames, too.’

‘Just in case he’s thinking on those lines, we’d better get a bit farther away

from it.'

They both ran some forty or fifty yards and lay flat.

In the event the fighter did not use his guns. Instead, an object detached itself from the fighter and hurtled down. There was a *whoosh* when it hit the ground and a cloud of white smoke billowed up.

'What's all that in aid of, do you think?' asked Sandy anxiously.

'Smoke bomb,' answered Biggles evenly. 'A marker, to let the people on the ground know where we are. They must be moving in the wrong direction. He'd see them from where he is.'

'Then let's get out of this,' Sandy said shortly.

'Get where?'

'Anywhere.'

'It's too late,' said Biggles. 'Hello! Who's this coming?'

¹ See *Biggles and the Black Mask*.

CHAPTER 11

BRADY COMES BACK

A man, a white man, had burst out of some reeds a hundred yards away and came running towards them. Staggering would perhaps be a better word, for he moved awkwardly, swaying and stumbling. His clothes, what could be seen of them for mud, looked as though he had been dragged through barbed wire.

After one hard look Sandy shouted: 'It's Jumbo! He's managed to get back at last.'

'Only just, by the look of him,' observed Biggles. 'Go and give him a hand. He looks as though he needs it.'

Sandy ran forward, and giving Brady an arm brought him in, to collapse on the ground, gasping for breath, clearly in the last stages of exhaustion.

He was a biggish man of about forty, fair, with a round face decorated with one of those out-sized, brushed up moustaches affected by R.A.F. pilots in the war.

'Where have you been all this time?' asked Sandy.

The question was ignored. 'What are you doing here?' asked Brady.

'We were sent to bring you home.'

'Who was in that kite I saw shot down?'

'Canson.'

'Oh no! Don't tell me that! What was he doing?'

'Running away — in our machine; the one that was to take you home,' put in Biggles.

Brady looked up at him. 'Who are you?'

'I'm a new boy. The name's Bigglesworth.'

'Not *Biggles* Bigglesworth.'

'That's the one. I'm Sandy's half-section. The Count got your signal and sent us out to find you and Canson and bring you home, complete with cargo. How he thought we could do that I don't know; but let it pass. We were shot at but managed to find a dry place to get down. Canson came over to us and brought us here. During the night, apparently not liking the look of things, he must have decided to pull out on his own without waiting for you or anyone else.'

'But Canson wouldn't do a thing like that!'

'You don't know Canson. I do. With him it's a case of "I'm all right, Jack, to hell with you." This time he wasn't as all right as he thought. I gather you saw what happened to him.'

Brady drew a deep breath. 'Yes, I saw. But what's going on here? What's this shooting about? Has everyone gone raving mad?'

'It looks that way. But just a minute before we go into that. Are you hurt,

or sick?’

‘I got a bullet in the leg. It bled a lot, but I don’t think it touched the bone. I’m hoping it went right through. I haven’t had a chance to look.’

‘How did this happen?’

‘I was on my way back here after sending the message home when I was jumped on by a bunch of lunatic natives. Said they were Congolese troops. Not having the least idea of what it was about I didn’t even put up any resistance. Then the fellow in charge told me he was going to shoot me for giving weapons to Congolese rebels. I told him not to be daft. Did you ever hear such ruddy nonsense? From the way he acted he’d have done it, too, there and then, if a herd of elephants hadn’t barged in to stampede the firing squad. I snatched my chance and made a run for it. There was some shooting and I got one in the leg, but it didn’t stop me. I managed to get clear and made for here.’

‘When was this?’

‘Yesterday. During the night the wound stiffened, so it took me all my time to get here. I lost some blood, but when I had a rest the bleeding stopped.’

‘We’d better have a look at this leg,’ Biggles said. ‘Not that there’s much we can do about it, I’m afraid, until we can get you to some sort of civilization.’

‘How do you reckon to do that?’

‘That’s what we were wondering when you rolled up.’

Biggles was wondering even more now. He saw at once what Sandy may have realized: the effect this new development was bound to have on their predicament, already serious. Unless they abandoned the wounded man, and that was unthinkable, they were tied to the spot where they stood. Brady was an anchor that would keep them there. ‘Which leg is it?’ he asked.

‘The left. High up.’

While Biggles and Sandy were between them pulling down Brady’s trousers to get at the wound Brady said: ‘What started this rumour about guns?’

‘Someone was kind enough to give the Congolese government the tip how the rebels were getting their guns and ammunition. You were bringing them in in a Constellation aircraft.’

‘What rot.’

‘Weren’t you?’

‘Of course I wasn’t.’

‘Are you sure of that?’

‘Quite sure. Are you suggesting I’m a liar?’

‘No, but it’s time someone put you wise.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You were in fact carrying guns. The cases you had on board were packed with them.’

Brady stared incredulously. ‘You’re kidding.’

‘I only wish you were right.’

‘But the Count said—’

‘I know. You were taking spares for agricultural machinery.’

‘That’s right.’

‘The farm gear was automatic rifles and cartridges.’

‘I don’t believe it. How do you know?’

‘We unpacked the cases to see what was in them, having ourselves been shot down for alleged gun-running.’

‘Holy smoke! Are these guns still in my kite? Because if they are, we’ve had it, chum.’

‘They aren’t. We’ve unloaded them and dumped them where we hope they won’t be found.’

‘How did you first know about them?’

‘We didn’t know for sure until we got here and opened the cases. As I’ve said, Sandy and I were shot down by a trigger-happy young man with a black face who informed us he was an officer of the Congolese Air Force. He’d had orders to force down any Constellations coming this way.’

‘Did Canson know we were loaded with guns?’

‘I don’t know for sure, and now we shall never know, but I don’t think so. His eyes nearly popped out when we opened the first case. Anyhow, we managed to find a dry spot and got down without doing any damage, whereupon the lad who pushed us down landed beside us and said we were under arrest. He told us why. He changed his tune and apologized when he looked into our machine and found it empty. We were only looking for you. It may have been the same bright young spark who was responsible for what happened to Canson.’

‘Spare my days! I should think he did apologize. Who do you think they are? They can’t go about shooting at—’

‘It seems they can. Anyway, that’s what they’re doing.’

‘But I swear I didn’t know anything about these damn guns.’

‘I’ve already realized that. It won’t make any difference if they catch us. You’re guilty of running guns to natives whether you knew it or not.’

‘As a matter of principle I wouldn’t touch guns if —’

‘Let’s not get on the political angle or we’re likely to argue all day. That won’t get us anywhere. We’ve plenty to talk about without that. What did you say when they grabbed you?’

‘I told ‘em the truth — or what I thought was the truth. I said I was loaded with farm tackle.’

‘Pity you had to tell ‘em that.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if they should arrive here they’ll want to see the stuff, and we shan’t be able to show it to them. When they find the machine empty, how are we to explain what became of it?’

‘I can’t see that it’s up to us to explain anything. Tell ‘em to go to blazes.’

What we do here is no concern of theirs. This isn't the Congo. According to my calculations we're in the Sudan.'

'You're right,' agreed Biggles. 'But I doubt if that argument would get us anywhere. They don't care where we are. They're obviously going to stop this gun-running at any cost. If there was a row they could say what they liked. We shouldn't be alive to give our version of the story.'

'Okay. If they come here asking questions I'll tell 'em that when I saw I'd have to land in the swamp I jettisoned my cargo to lighten the machine. Let 'em ruddy well look for it.'

'It might work,' conceded Biggles, although without any great confidence.

The wound looked ugly, but the bullet had gone right through the soft flesh below the thigh, so it might have been worse. The blood had congealed, stopping the bleeding. So far there was no inflammation. Bandages were made from the sleeves of their shirts, and as good a job as was possible in the circumstances was completed. Biggles advised against washing the wound for fear of infection, the only water available being far from clean. 'You should soon be on your feet if you'll lie still,' he said.

'If I'm allowed to be still.'

'Put it that way if you like.'

'How about grub? It's some time since I had any.'

'Sorry, nothing doing. We haven't any. Not a sausage. We haven't eaten ourselves for two days.'

'That's dandy. It leaves you with only one thing to do.'

'What's that?'

'You two push off. By travelling light, heading west, you might get somewhere.'

'And leave you here?'

'Of course. What else? I can't walk. You can't carry me. There's no need for all three of us to starve to death.'

'That's noble of you, but forget it. We all stay, if Sandy agrees. There's a dead buffalo not far away. If we can find it we'll chew on that. It'd be tough going, but people have eaten their boots before today. By the way, who was in charge of these troops — the gent who decided to shoot you?'

'A man named Ducard — Monsieur Ducard, they called him. An officer or N.C.O. of sorts. Looks like a half-caste. Speaks Belgian-French to his troops, but can talk English. I wouldn't try to guess his nationality, even if he knows it himself. I got the impression he's one of these mercenaries recruited by the Congolese government farther south. I hear they get a hundred quid a week for hunting down rebels and knocking 'em off. They can have it. Man-hunting poor devils armed only with bows and arrows isn't my idea of joy.'

'Anything else you can tell us?'

'I don't think so.'

'How many are there in the party?'

'I didn't count 'em, but I'd say about a dozen. More than we could handle,

anyway. They've got rifles and bayonets, and I fancy they don't care how often they use them. Whoever set these blacks on killing each other ought to be horsewhipped.'

'I agree, but let's not go into that. It isn't our affair. You lie still. We don't want you in a fever.'

'Why don't you get out?'

'Not without you. For all I know it might be a hundred miles to the nearest road where there might be wheeled traffic to give you a lift. Have you got a gun on you?'

'No. I had one, but they took it off me.'

'In that case, Sandy, I shall have to borrow yours.'

'What do you want it for?'

'I'm going to try to find that buffalo. It may not be quite dead. If it isn't I shall have to shoot it, to put it out of its misery. I'll try to hack some meat off it.'

'Got a knife?'

'A penknife.' Biggles showed it.

'You'll have a job to get through its hide with that. Take my pocket knife, it's bigger.' Sandy handed it over, with his automatic. 'Don't be too long,' he said, as Biggles turned away.

'I'll get back as soon as I can,' replied Biggles.

He walked towards the belt of tall reeds into which the stricken beast had disappeared. He had no trouble in finding its track; blood and broken reeds showed clearly which way it had gone. Fifty yards on and he came upon it. It was stone dead, and had apparently been dead for some time.

He did not immediately set about his self-imposed task. He felt he needed time to think; and he had plenty to think about; more than his brain seemed capable of bringing into some sort of order. Sitting on the animal's rump he lit one of his three remaining cigarettes and began the mental exercise of trying to get things sorted out.

The scheme he had devised for getting on terms with the gun-runners had started well enough; perhaps too well, for it now seemed somehow to have got off course. Things had gone — and were still going — in a direction very different from the one he had imagined. He had found the men he hoped to find, and now, having found them, didn't know what to do about it. He had assumed, naturally, that they would know what they were doing; but he was now satisfied that they did not. That made a world of difference. They had been deceived, all of them, including Jumbo Brady, and had acted in all innocence, although that might be difficult to prove if they were taken to court.

At the moment there did not seem the remotest chance of getting them to court — or getting them anywhere, for that matter. A disturbing thought was: he was now not sure that he wanted to put them in court, even if that eventually proved possible. The man to put in court was the Count, the real

culprit. But here again there was no conclusive evidence that he was the man to blame for what had been going on. At least there was a doubt. Was he, too, being deceived? Could he, too, justifiably plead innocence, claiming that he did not know what was in the cases? He could say he had accepted them in good faith and had neither the right nor reason to examine their contents.

This led to the thought: was the man at the root of the trouble someone he had not met? If so, was he a member of the Count's organization or a shadowy figure lurking in the background?

Biggles felt that before he could strike he would need more facts, gather further evidence. But how? He wouldn't find it in Africa. As things were at present he was in no state to do anything; and those conditions might persist for some time. He could see no way out.

There was of course one way; and had Sandy and Brady been guilty of gun-running he might have considered it seriously. He could leave them and save himself. This was his chance. Travelling alone, unencumbered, he could strike westwards until he reached somewhere where food and perhaps transport was available, if only a native Sudanese settlement. But he was convinced they were not guilty, anyway, not to their knowledge, even though in fact they had been carrying guns. No doubt what was going on in Africa was going on elsewhere; but that did not alter the case.

No, he decided, he couldn't leave the two men he had come to regard as companions. Not merely leave them to their own resources, but leave them to face the music should they be captured. And the music was likely to be rifle fire. How would he feel if he left them, later to learn they had been shot? No, he couldn't do that.

He finished his cigarette, for once at a loss to know what to do, and got up intending to set about the unsavoury task of cutting through the skin of a dead buffalo with a pocket knife. Clearly, they would have to eat something or death by starvation would answer all their problems.

He stiffened as voices reached his ears. Not two voices, but several. Closing the knife he advanced to the edge of the reeds. What he saw did not surprise him. The Congolese troops had arrived. One of them was in a furious altercation with Sandy.

Pushing his way into the open Biggles walked towards them.

CHAPTER 12

SERGEANT DUCARD TALKS

The conversation stopped and all heads turned as Biggles approached. 'What's going on here?' he inquired evenly as he joined the party.

A tall man in camouflaged battle dress, carrying a revolver, with a skin that was neither black nor white but that in-between tint that usually denotes a mixed breed, answered: 'Where have you just come from?'

'I could ask you that question,' returned Biggles. 'What's the matter? Is there some trouble?'

'You are all under arrest,' was the curt reply.

'Indeed. How interesting. And who, may I ask, are you, to arrest anyone?'

'I am Sergeant Ducard.'

'Of what?'

'The Congolese army.'

'Then what are you doing here?' questioned Biggles. 'This isn't the Congo. This is the Sudan.'

'The territory is under dispute.'

'In that case you have no authority here. Have you a permit from the Sudanese government to shoot big game?'

'What big game?'

'Yesterday, you or one of your men, shot a buffalo.'

'How do you know?'

'It came this way, wounded.'

'I don't need a permit.'

'When the Sudan authorities hear about this you may find you do. But never mind that. What nonsense is this about being under arrest?'

'You are smuggling weapons into the Congo.'

'What gave you that curious idea?'

'We know.'

'How can you know what is in this plane?'

'I saw the telegram.'

'What are you talking about? What telegram?' Having formed the impression that the half-breed was not over-intelligent, Biggles was really only talking to lead him on in the hope that he would let something drop.

'A Russian friend,' said Ducard.

'Oh! What's his name? I may know him,' returned Biggles, affecting a tone of casual interest.

'Miskoff.'

Biggles had to steady himself under the shock of this unexpected revelation. 'No,' he said. 'I don't know him, but I've heard of him. Where are these weapons he told you about supposed to be?'

Ducard pointed to the Constellation. 'In there.'

Biggles laughed. 'That's news to me. Help yourself, sergeant. You're welcome to all the weapons you can find. But before we go any further I must warn you that you'll hear more about this. One of your flying officers has already shot down two aeroplanes belonging to the company for which I work. One came down in flames. The pilot was killed. That was murder, and someone will have to answer for it. I don't know why he did it because he had already searched the plane and found nothing. That must be him now, looking for someone else to shoot.' Biggles indicated the fighter, which had returned and was now circling over them. 'You know, sergeant,' he went on reprovingly, 'you can't go about shooting people for no reason. Look at the position we're in; stranded without food, and we have to get this wounded man to hospital. You or one of your men shot him.'

'He ran away.'

'Of course he did. Wouldn't you run away if you were told you would be shot?'

The native troops had gathered around and were listening to the conversation with expressionless faces, although whether or not they understood what was being said was another matter. Sandy, standing by Brady who was still lying on the ground, was also taking more than a passing interest.

Ducard strode purposefully to the aircraft and climbed aboard. He was soon out, looking puzzled.

'Well?' queried Biggles. 'Now I hope you're satisfied. The man who told you we were carrying guns was either talking through his hat or else he had been incorrectly informed.'

'My orders were to shoot anyone, black or white, carrying guns.'

'Quite right,' agreed Biggles. 'But don't you think it would be a good thing to make sure of the guns before you do the shooting? As it is, this outrage is going to cost your government a lot of money. They'll have to put the blame on somebody and that's likely to be you.'

Ducard seemed to appreciate this. He hesitated.

For Biggles it was an anxious moment. What he was afraid of more than anything was that Ducard might start a search for the guns — which a man of brighter intelligence would have done — and find them. Should that happen there could be no further argument. Ducard would be only too happy to carry out his orders. And, moreover, he would be justified, saving the fact that he was not in his own country.

'You will come with me,' declared Ducard at last.

'Where?'

'To my headquarters.'

'Where is that?'

'In the Congo. The General can decide what to do with you.'

'How far away is it?'

‘Two days’ march.’

‘Two days! Are you mad?’ Biggles pointed at Brady. ‘This man can’t walk.’

‘Then he can stay here. I didn’t bring him here. He chose to come. You and the other man will come with me.’

Biggles looked horrified. He really was. ‘Are you saying you’ll leave a wounded man here to die?’

‘Why should I care what happens to him?’

‘You shot him, otherwise he wouldn’t be here in this state,’ retorted Biggles, vehemently.

‘That doesn’t worry me.’

‘Then it should.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘You will. You will, I’ll see to that.’ Biggles, who had with difficulty kept his temper, now showed signs of losing it.

‘You will be lucky to get the chance,’ Ducard said, scowling. ‘You talk like that to me and I shut your mouth for good. What else can I do except leave the man here?’

‘You are not short of men. Let them make a stretcher and carry him. Or you can leave him here with some food, and us to take care of him, while you make inquiries about us. Ask Lieutenant I’Nobo. He’ll tell you that we did not carry guns in our plane. He searched it. We shall still be here when you come back because we couldn’t get far carrying our sick friend. You can do what you like, but I shall stay here with him.’

‘You talk big, mister,’ growled Ducard. ‘You stay, but you stay dead. Now I shoot you all. Then I have no more trouble with you.’ He spoke as if he meant it.

It is likely that he would have carried out his threat, but at this juncture a new factor intervened. The conversation had been carried on to the accompaniment of aircraft noise from the fighter, which had returned and was now making circuits overhead. The pilot, whoever he might be, must have had a bird’s-eye view of the scene by the grounded Constellation and no doubt wondered what was going on. But that he might attempt to land did not cross Biggles’ mind. Even though the engine had suddenly been cut, and the machine began to lose height, he could not believe this was the pilot’s intention. Talk was suspended while all eyes watched the aircraft.

It continued to lose height and presently swung round into a position as for an approach run, airscrew still idling.

‘Looks like he’s going to join the party,’ observed Sandy.

‘Never,’ returned Biggles. ‘He wouldn’t be so daft. He must see what’s happened to the Constellation.’

‘Perhaps, perhaps not,’ contributed Brady who, like the rest, was watching with interest. ‘Even though he realizes what’s happened to my machine, he may think, being lighter, his wheels won’t cut in.’

‘By thunder! He is going to land,’ cried Biggles as the fighter, now nearly down to the level of the reeds, came on. ‘He must be out of his mind to take such a chance.’

‘He doesn’t know he’s taking a chance,’ Sandy said, grinning. ‘This should be pretty to watch.’

‘Well, there’s nothing we can do to stop him,’ asserted Biggles.

The plane skimmed in over the open ground. It flattened out inches from the ground and sank slowly on even keel for what in the ordinary way would have been a perfect landing. The wheels touched the turf lightly and for a few seconds ran on. Then the expected happened. The plane suddenly lost its forward momentum, the tail slowly rising. It stopped abruptly as if the wheels had seized up, throwing out mud and grass. The tail cocked. The nose dipped.

‘Pretty good,’ murmured Sandy.

Biggles shook his head sadly. ‘As I remarked earlier, he’ll do better with more practice.’

‘Don’t blame him,’ said Sandy sympathetically. ‘I made the same mistake. Here it’s all too easy.’

The pilot was of course unhurt. The machine was travelling too slowly at the finish for him to suffer any serious injury. That no doubt was why the wheels, when the full weight fell on them, went through the deceptive crust that covered the soft mud below. Without haste he got down and backed away, pushing up his goggles to survey the mischief. Then he turned and walked towards the group of spectators. For the first time his face could be seen. It was black.

‘So it is I’Nobo,’ said Biggles thoughtfully. ‘I wonder what he wants.’

‘Just curiosity, to see what goes on, I’d say,’ murmured Sandy. ‘I hope he’ll make Ducard think again before he starts any shooting.’

Biggles nodded. ‘He may have something to say about that. Make no mistake, we were on a nasty spot when he blew in. It looks as if he, too, will have to walk home. Unless he has a stronger sense of humour than I have, he won’t split his seams laughing.’

The coloured pilot joined them, his face wearing a comical expression of disgust, presumably at his performance in front of an audience.

‘Good day, Lieutenant,’ greeted Biggles. ‘Bad luck, although your bad luck may be good luck for us.’

I’Nobo’s eyes asked a question.

Biggles explained. ‘The sergeant here was about to shoot us for delivering guns to your enemies. I’d be obliged if you’d tell him we do not carry guns.’

I’Nobo frowned. He looked at the sergeant. ‘These gentlemen do not carry guns,’ he said in his high-pitched nasal voice. ‘No shooting.’

The sergeant looked disappointed.

Biggles went on. ‘Yesterday you shot down a plane and killed a friend of mine. Why did you do it? It was mine. You knew it had nothing in it. You examined it yourself.’

I'Nobo's expression changed to one of surprise, and something like consternation. 'Was it that one?'

'Yes; of course it was.'

'I am sorry. I did not know. I thought it was a new plane just arrived; perhaps the one with the guns.' The negro spoke with such obvious sincerity that Biggles did not doubt the truth of what he said.

'Why did you land here?' asked Biggles.

'To look in this plane for weapons.'

'But you could see the sergeant and his men here. They would do that.'

'They take long time get home. My commandant waits news of the guns. I fly home quick and tell him.'

'Well, there are no guns here. The sergeant knows that. He's looked inside.'

'Why you leave your plane to come here?'

'To see if anyone here needed help. We saw the plane on the ground and walked here. The other plane was on its way home to report that the missing one had been found. Our problem now is how to get home ourselves.'

I'Nobo smiled ruefully. 'Me walk, too.'

Biggles looked across at the small aircraft. 'Perhaps not. Presently we will see. It would be better if you could fly home to report what has happened and perhaps drop us some food. We have had nothing to eat since you shot us down and we have a wounded man on our hands.'

'What is wrong with him?'

'He was shot.'

'Why?'

'For trying to get back to his plane, this one, after he had been to look for help. I hoped the sergeant, who has plenty of men, would carry him; but he talks of taking us and leaving him here. We are willing to go with the sergeant to get this business straightened out, but we refuse to go leaving our friend here to die.'

'What can I do?'

'I suggest we look at your plane to see if it can be got into the air. This big machine is in too deep, but it may be possible to get yours out.'

'You think so?' said I'Nobo hopefully.

'I will tell you what I think when I've had a look at it. I have had experience of this sort of thing.'

'Let us look.'

Sandy joined Biggles and I'Nobo as they walked across to the stranded plane. The sergeant looked none too pleased, but he raised no objection. Anyway, he couldn't very well override the decision of an officer. He followed them.

Arriving at the aircraft Biggles studied it intently. He started at the nose and noted that the airscrew had not quite touched the ground. This, as he remarked to Sandy, was what he had most feared, for had a blade been

damaged in the slightest degree it would have settled any question of flying there and then. The other most important point of interest was the wheels. They had torn furrows in the soft ground before breaking through the surface crust, but had then sunk only to the hubs. Nothing had been damaged. Alone, a pilot could not have done much about it; but there was plenty of labour available, and as Biggles had said, this was not the first time he had been faced with such a situation.

‘I don’t think there should be too much difficulty about this,’ he told its pilot.

I’Nobo looked relieved. He showed two rows of white teeth in a smile of satisfaction. Biggles, too, was relieved, for more reasons than one. He would now have an excuse to keep the soldiers employed. All along his great fear had been that one or some of them would wander into the tamarisks and come upon the guns. They would tell their own story, one which would probably settle their fate.

‘If we can get you into the air what will you do?’ he said to I’Nobo.

The black airman said he would fly straight back to his base.

‘Will you then come back as quickly as you can and drop us some food? We’re starving; and don’t forget you were responsible for us being here.’

I’Nobo said he would certainly do that. ‘Will you stay here, or will you go with Sergeant Ducard when he goes?’

Biggles hesitated; but he had to make up his mind. There were arguments for and against both arrangements. If they stayed they would be on short rations because I’Nobo couldn’t be expected to bring them enough food to last for any length of time. Moreover, they would eventually have to make their own way out of the great swamp to the nearest point of civilization. This would mean a long and difficult march. Again, Ducard might elect to remain with them, or near at hand, and this would prolong the risk of the guns being found, always a possibility while the troops were there. They could account themselves lucky this had not already happened.

On the other hand, if Ducard went off, taking them with him, there was no knowing what he would do; how he would behave. It would be an easy matter for him to dispose of them on some pretext. He had made it evident that he disliked them. Aside from that, in Biggles’ opinion he was not a man to be trusted.

‘How far are we from any sort of transport?’ he asked I’Nobo.

I’Nobo pointed. ‘In that direction, fifteen-twenty miles, is a river. There are people there with canoes.’

Biggles chose what he thought was the lesser of two evils. Even fifteen miles, with a sick man, was too far. ‘If the sergeant will make some sort of contraption to carry our wounded friend we will go with him when he leaves here. It will be some days before our friend is able to walk any distance without the risk of reopening the hole in his leg. But before we say any more about that, let us see if we can get your plane clear.’

The negro soldiers were called over and told what they were to do. This had to be done second-hand through either I'Nobo or Ducard, who spoke their language, so Biggles could only hope for the best. He knew the difficulty of trying to get a gang of natives to act absolutely together.

CHAPTER 13

BIGGLES SHOWS HOW

The soldiers had no proper tools amongst their equipment for what was to be done, but they soon grasped the idea and by using bayonets, knives and even their hands, they were soon making good progress. The fact that the earth was soft made easier the task of cutting away the turf and tussocks in front of the wheels to form a gently upward sloping rut from the base of the tyres to the unbroken ground. When this had been completed to Biggles' satisfaction, he ordered bundles of reeds to be brought and these pushed in under the wheels, and laid along the rut, to give the tyres a grip. The tail unit was then pulled down so that the fuselage stood in flying position.

'Now let's try our luck,' Biggles said to I'Nobo. 'You'd better let me do it. It's a bit tricky.'

'Yes. You do it. You know how,' agreed I'Nobo. 'Is there something I can do?'

'Yes. You must make the men understand exactly what they are to do. When I run up the engine they must all hold the plane. When you see me hold up my hand, shout, and they must all let go together. It is vital that they stand clear absolutely together. One at a time is no use. If that happens the machine may slew round and do some damage. Can you get them to do that, do you think?'

'I will try.'

'Good.' Actually, Biggles was far from confident that the men would understand, or if they did understand, carry out the order with the necessary precision.

I'Nobo did the explaining.

As Biggles moved towards the cockpit he heard Ducard say in a protesting voice: 'If you let him do this he will fly away.'

Biggles looked at him over his shoulder. 'I have no reason to fly away,' he said curtly.

He settled himself in the cockpit and started the engine, leaving it just ticking over while the men were placed in position, holding the plane to prevent it from moving before the signal for release was given. This was done by I'Nobo who by now had grasped the general idea. Here he showed intelligence; but then, had he not been intelligent where aircraft were concerned, it is unlikely that he would have been selected for a pilot.

When everyone was in position Biggles eased open the throttle, sending aft a tearing slip-stream that must have been very uncomfortable for the troops in their flimsy uniforms. However, hair on end and eyes rolling, they hung on. Then, simultaneously, Biggles opened the throttle wide and raised a hand.

The plane surged forward a little way and then slipped back into the rather

deep depressions the wheels had made, probably because two of the men at the tail hung on a little too long. This, of course, was what Biggles had feared. He throttled back instantly to prevent the machine tipping forward on its nose, while the natives, like children playing a game, roared with laughter as if it was a great joke.

‘Try again,’ Biggles shouted to I’Nobo. ‘Make them understand they must let go together.’

‘Yes.’

The operation was repeated. Again the engine was run up, the aircraft straining like a wild horse that finds itself tethered. In desperation Biggles took a chance and turned on full throttle. For a second it was touch and go. The same two men were slow to release their hold and were lifted off their feet before they were blown off by the slip-stream. The machine nearly went on its nose as it lurched forward on to the bed of reeds. The undercarriage wheels bit into them and the aircraft was clear. The engine noise died as Biggles instantly throttled right back.

‘There you are,’ Biggles told the pilot as he jumped down. ‘Get going before she sinks in again. When you take her off get airborne as quickly as you can.’

‘Yes. Thank you.’ I’Nobo looked delighted. ‘I remember this trick.’

‘Before you go, have you any cigarettes on you?’

I’Nobo felt in his tunic pocket and produced a somewhat crushed paper packet, which he handed over before climbing into his seat.

‘Don’t forget to bring us food,’ called Biggles.

‘I come back in one hour.’

‘We shall be waiting.’

I’Nobo settled in his seat, fastening the safety-belt. He started up. Everyone stood clear. The engine bellowed. The plane, after a short run, lifted, and climbed away towards the west.

Sandy grinned. ‘He was lucky to have you about,’ he remarked, as they watched the machine disappear. ‘Pity we couldn’t get our machine off the same way.’

‘No use thinking about that — not yet, anyway. Under this sun and with no more rain the ground’s drying out fast. A few more days like this and something might be done about it if we had a spade. But as we aren’t likely to find a spade lying about here we might as well forget it.’

‘What do we do now?’ asked Sandy, as they walked back to where Jumbo had been an interested spectator of the proceedings.

‘Wait for I’Nobo to come back and drop us some grub, of course.’

‘Do you think he’ll come?’

‘I’m sure he will if nothing happens to prevent it. Meanwhile, pray, and pray hard, that none of these fellows goes into those tamarisks. Our lives may depend on it.’

‘Ducard looks pretty glum.’

‘He’s probably regretting he didn’t shoot us before I’Nobo arrived. Now it’s known we’re here, he can’t very well do it without a good excuse.’

The party settled down to wait, Biggles and Sandy squatting on their usual tussocks near Jumbo. The soldiers lay on the ground together, talking and laughing, probably telling and retelling the story of how the plane was got away, dwelling on the discomfort of the men who had hung on too long. Ducard sat a little apart, scowling at the landscape.

‘I’d like to know what he’s thinking,’ said Sandy.

‘So would I,’ returned Biggles. ‘He’s hatching some sort of mischief, I imagine.’

‘I have an idea that feller doesn’t like us,’ put in Jumbo.

‘You’re right he doesn’t.’

‘Why? We’ve done nothing to him.’

‘Oh yes we have. He thought he’d made a capture that could lead to promotion; now we look like slipping through his fingers. Apart from that, no doubt he’s got a chip on his shoulder because he’s what he is, neither one thing nor the other.’

‘That wasn’t his fault.’

‘Of course it wasn’t, but it makes no difference. I’ve met that type before. ‘Some of ‘em turn out that way. They reckon they’re a cut above the negro — which is why he’s sitting by himself now — and an inferiority complex prevents him from joining us.’

Time passed. The situation remained unchanged. Biggles redressed Jumbo’s wound to the best of his ability with the materials available. He was glad to see there were no complications. The wound was drying up nicely.

‘Time I’Nobo was back,’ observed Sandy, later. ‘He said he’d be away an hour. It’s now an hour and a half.’

‘Maybe he had some explaining to do,’ suggested Biggles. ‘That might take some time.’

When another hour had passed and still there was neither sight nor sound of the aircraft, even Biggles began to look anxious, and had to admit that something must have gone wrong.

‘If he had some sort of structural failure as a result of what happened here he might not have reached home,’ Sandy said glumly. ‘I’m getting hungry.’

Anxiety grew when Ducard suddenly got up as if he had reached a decision. He barked an order. Not speaking the language, Biggles did not know what it was, but he suspected the truth when the troops started to put their accoutrements, which they had of course taken off. This done they fell in to marching order, in single file.

‘Better see what he’s going to do,’ Sandy said.

Biggles got up and went over. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I am going,’ answered Ducard belligerently.

‘Going? Where?’

‘Back to camp.’

'Aren't you going to wait for Lieutenant I'Nobo?'

'He will not come now.'

'How do you know he won't come?'

'If he is coming he is back by now.'

'If you go, what about us?'

'You can come with us or you can stay.' Ducard spoke as if he didn't care either way.

'But our friend can't walk. You know that.'

'Then he must stay.'

'But we won't go without him. I have already told you that.'

'That is for you to decide.'

Biggles began to get angry. 'Dash it all, man. You shot him, so he's your responsibility.'

'I have no responsibility,' stated Ducard, in an offhand voice.

'The idea was, if you left you would carry him.'

'That was not my idea.'

Biggles realized he was wasting his breath trying to argue with a man who was determined to be as difficult as possible. 'Very well,' he said stiffly. 'You go. We shall stay. You will of course leave us some food.'

'I have not enough. We have only corn and not much of that. I must keep it to get my men home.'

Biggles could have struck the man; but he swallowed hard and kept his temper. 'All right, if that's how you feel. You can leave us one of those.' He pointed to one of the small iron cooking pots carried by some of the men as part of their equipment.

'What do you want it for?'

'To boil water.'

'No. We have none to spare. Perhaps I'Nobo will bring you one,' Ducard sneered, now being deliberately insulting.

'Now you listen to me, Ducard,' said Biggles grimly. 'I've stood from you as much as I can stand. When I get out of here I shall see to it that your government knows about the way you've behaved. It's getting aid from the British government and it wouldn't be so funny if that was stopped. Now, give me one of those pots.'

This was really bluffing, and Biggles knew it; but he felt he had nothing to lose. Anyway, it seemed to work. Ducard hesitated. Then he called one of the men who carried a pot.

'Give him the pot,' he ordered.

The man handed it over.

Biggles tapped a tin mug that hung on his belt. 'I shall need that, too.'

'Why?' snapped Ducard.

'Because I can't drink out of an iron pot.'

'Give it to him.'

The man slipped the mug off his belt and passed it to Biggles.

‘Thank you,’ acknowledged Biggles. He took out his wallet and handed the man an English pound note. ‘Buy yourself a new one.’

The man’s teeth flashed in a grin.

Nothing more was said. Ducard placed himself at the head of his men, gave an order and marched off. Biggles returned to Sandy and Jumbo.

‘Good riddance,’ said Sandy. ‘I’m glad to see the back of him. At least he won’t find those blasted guns. That’s all the excuse he would have needed to bump us off.’

Biggles agreed. ‘Let’s hope he doesn’t come back.’

‘Why should he?’

‘To see if we’re still here, dead or alive. I wouldn’t put anything past that nasty piece of work. It would suit him to find us dead. Then we could never report the way he’s behaved. I have a feeling his men don’t like him any more than we do.’

‘So what do we do now?’

Biggles smiled wanly. ‘This is where we go back to square one, as they say. What *can* we do except stay here? There’s still a chance I’Nobo will come.’

‘We might as well forget about him,’ said Sandy lugubriously. ‘If he intended to come back he’d have been here by now.’

‘If I’m any judge of a man, if he doesn’t do what he said he’d do, it won’t be his fault.’ Biggles lit one of the Belgian cigarettes I’Nobo had given him and passed the pack to the others.

‘Meanwhile I suppose we’d better start boiling our boots,’ suggested Sandy, glumly.

‘We haven’t come to that yet. You’ve forgotten something.’

‘Forgotten what?’

‘A whole buffalo, if it’s still where I saw it, or if it hasn’t got overripe. No doubt it’ll be tough chewing, but not as tough as boot leather. Why do you think I asked for a pot? Boiled buffalo shouldn’t make bad soup; and as it isn’t easy to eat soup with your fingers — not that I’ve ever tried it — I also managed to get hold of a mug.’

‘Fair enough. I’m ready to eat boiled elephant, tusks and all,’ declared Sandy.

‘Right. Then the sooner we get cracking on it the better. Lend me that knife of yours again and I’ll try to hack off a rump steak. It’s going to be a messy business, but starving men can’t be choosers. Sorry I can’t promise any vegetables. You take the pot and look for a pool of reasonably clean water. Boiling should kill any bugs in it.’

Sandy picked up the pot and set off. Biggles walked towards the spot where he had found the dead animal.

He was back first, followed by a cloud of flies, carrying a gory-looking mess which in fact consisted of several thin strips of meat. ‘Not exactly in the luxury class and it wouldn’t take top prize for hygiene,’ he told Jumbo,

cheerfully, as he laid the meat on a patch of clean grass and covered it with more to keep the flies off. This done he hunted around and returned with an armful of dry sticks and anything else that would burn. By the time Sandy was back the fire was ready.

The pot was put on. Biggles cut off small pieces of meat and dropped them in. 'I'm no great cook,' he said, 'but I imagine the longer this stuff boils the easier it will be to take. If we can't chew the meat we should have some fair soup. And I'll tell you something else. If we were dining at the Ritz and asked for a dish of buffalo stew they'd charge the earth for it, even if they could find a buffalo, which is highly improbable.'

'Nothing like being cheerful about it,' said Jumbo.

'The great thing in life is to keep your sense of humour,' returned Biggles. 'It isn't always easy, but if you lose it, you've had it, chum.'

They were now squatting round the fire in the evening light waiting for the pot to boil. 'Doesn't smell too bad,' observed Sandy, leaning over it.

'I don't see why it should. After all, it's beef, even if it's what you might call wild.'

'It's jolly decent of you fellers to stay with me,' said Jumbo, seriously, 'and if I don't talk about it, don't think I don't appreciate it. You could have saved yourselves.'

'We shall, I hope, save all of us,' replied Biggles. 'Tell me this, Jumbo. Would you have agreed to dish out guns to natives had you known what was in those cases?'

'I've never really thought about it. I might have thought twice—'

Sandy cut in. 'Don't look now, but there's somebody in those shrubs where we dumped the guns.'

Biggles looked startled. 'Are you sure?'

'Pretty sure.'

'It wasn't an animal you saw?'

'Not unless it was a gorilla.'

'There aren't any gorillas here.'

'Then it must have been a man. He slipped out of the rushes and dived into the tamarisks at the far end. Who the devil could it be?'

'I'll give you one guess,' said Biggles, slowly.

CHAPTER 14

A SHADOW IN THE TAMARISKS

Sandy looked alarmed. 'Not Ducard!'

'Not the man himself. More likely a scout sent back to see what we're doing. He still thinks we're up to something. We've seen no sign of anyone else in this part of the country.'

'If you're right it can only mean that Ducard is still hanging around in the vicinity.'

'That's what it looks like. It doesn't surprise me.'

'If that chap in the bushes finds those guns he'll be off like a scalded cat to tell Ducard. That *would* send the balloon up.'

'And us with it,' returned Biggles dryly.

'What can we do about it?'

'There's only one thing we can do. Lend me your gun.'

Sandy produced the weapon. His eyes asked a question.

Biggles got up. 'I'm going to see who's in those shrubs. You two sit still as if we don't suspect anything.'

'And if it is one of Ducard's men, what will you do?' asked Sandy.

'That will depend on what *he* does.'

'What if he finds the guns?'

'If he doesn't find them I may do nothing. If he does spot them I shall know, because I shall take up a position near them. They're at this end. If he should find them, and as it will soon be dark he may not, I shall see to it that he doesn't go back to that bad-tempered swine Ducard. This is no time for kind words. It's us or him. Stand by. Keep the pot boiling.'

Daylight was beginning to dim as Biggles strolled to the nearest reeds and, keeping inside them, worked his way round to the nearest part of the tamarisks. Reaching them he paused to listen. He could hear nothing except the hum of countless mosquitoes, now rising from the swamp, and the first croaks of the frog chorus. He moved on towards the arms dump, picking his way carefully through a litter of dead twigs, and stopping every few yards to peer ahead and listen for any indication of the intruder.

Somewhere not far away a twig snapped. The sound came from the left; the fringe of the copse that overlooked the site of the camp fire. Gun in hand, with extreme caution he edged towards it.

Again came the soft crackle of a dead twig being crushed underfoot. It suggested that the man concerned was either careless or felt secure.

Biggles crouched behind a low thicket, eyes probing the undergrowth through a fast-fading twilight. To his right he could just make out the hump of debris that had been thrown over the guns to hide them. The intruder, he was glad to note from the sounds he made, was nowhere near them.

He waited.

His patience was rewarded when presently he made out a shadowy figure moving furtively along just inside the outer fringe of the feathery shrubs. It was coming towards him, taking, it seemed, from the way the man often stopped to stare, a particular interest in the camp. Not once did he turn his head to face the interior of the shrubbery, apparently assuming there was nobody there.

Biggles was satisfied that so far the man had not come upon the weapons, and in the now dim light it did not seem likely that he would unless he changed direction and stumbled over them. It was difficult to discern details, but Biggles thought he was one of Ducard's men. He carried slung on his shoulder what appeared to be a haversack and water-bottle; but the odd thing was he did not have a rifle — at least, as far as Biggles could make out. Why no rifle, or any other weapon?

Closer and closer came the man to where Biggles crouched behind his small thicket of secondary growth, obviously without the slightest suspicion that he was being watched. A few more paces would take him out of sight in the gathering gloom, so Biggles' problem now was whether or not to reveal himself. Had the man looked like retiring he would have let him go, but he was still moving closer to the camp, plain to see by reason of the fire. For what purpose? Was the man merely there to keep watch on them, or did he intend some devilment?

Biggles decided that for his peace of mind he would have to know exactly what the fellow was doing, why he was acting in a manner so sinister; and this would have to be done before he lost sight of him, or he might never know. Once lost the man would be difficult to locate.

His mind made up, he rose to his feet and strode forward. 'What are you doing?' he rapped out.

In the quiet of the copse the shock the words produced was to be expected. The man spun round with a shuddering intake of breath and raised his hands quickly when he saw the pistol pointing at him. 'No shoot, sir,' he pleaded.

Looking closely at the man's face Biggles saw, not without surprise, that he was the soldier who had parted with his cooking pot. 'Ah! It's you,' he said. 'So you speak English.'

'Yessir. Speak English good.'

'How does that happen?'

'I mission school boy, sir. Work English copper mine in Katanga.'

'Why did you leave?'

'War come. Mine finish. No work. Mr. Ducard, foreman at mine, makes me join army. I no like. Me coward. No want to be killed.'

'What are you doing here, away from camp? Come on, now, the truth — or else.' Biggles made a significant movement with his pistol.

'I run away.'

'What do you mean — ran away?'

‘Ducard bad man, sir. He hit and kick me. Take my money.’

‘So you’ve deserted him.’

‘Yessir. God’s troof, sir.’ From the way the man spoke he saw no shame in this.

‘Why did you come here?’

‘Work for you, boss.’

Biggles was more than somewhat taken aback. Whatever answer he may have expected it was not this. ‘If you wanted to work for us why didn’t you come straight to our camp instead of creeping here like a thief?’ he asked suspiciously.

‘Think Ducard p’raps come back here look for me. I look see first.’

The explanation seemed plausible. ‘Where did you leave him?’

The man extended a vague arm. ‘Way back.’

‘How far?’

‘Three-four miles. Make camp for night. I go fetch wood for fire. No go back.’

Biggles considered the matter. The man was a deserter, or so he said. From the brazen way he admitted it, it was probably the truth. Why should he lie? The fact that he had no rifle gave support to his statement. Ducard would hardly send him on a mission unarmed. If he had in fact been detailed to gather firewood, as he claimed, he would not take his rifle. So when he bolted he had left it behind.

What to make of this curious and totally unexpected state of affairs Biggles did not know; whether to be glad or sorry things had turned out as they had. He was relieved the man had not found the weapons. No matter whether the man was telling the truth or not, that was one good thing. He would not find them now, in the dark. The man said his idea was to work for them. The thought occurred to Biggles that he may have seen the money in his wallet when he had tipped him for the mug.

But — there was a but. Was all this a trick? Was this a scheme of Ducard’s for getting a spy into their camp? Possibly, he thought, but unlikely. He decided the man was telling the truth. Assuming this to be correct, what Biggles feared was that Ducard would guess what had happened and come back to their camp to see if the deserter was there. Where else could the man go? In fact there was nowhere else. Not even a native would willingly wander about alone and unarmed in a dangerous place like the Sudd. The man standing before him, in his own naive way, had said he thought Ducard would come to their camp looking for him.

After weighing the matter in his mind, Biggles decided it would be as dangerous to turn the man loose as to keep him. Perhaps on the whole it would be better to keep him in sight rather than not know where he was or what he was doing.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Christmas, sir. I born at mission Christmas Day.’

‘All right, Christmas. You can stay with us and make yourself useful. But understand this. If I find you have been telling lies I shall shoot you.’

‘Yessir. Shoot me.’

‘And you had better understand this, too. If Ducard comes looking for you I shan’t be able to save you.’

‘No sir. If he come I run.’

‘That’s all. Now walk towards our fire. I shall be close behind you, so don’t attempt to run away.’

‘I no run, sir.’

Actually, as the man hadn’t seen the guns, Biggles wouldn’t have cared much if he had run away. It would solve his new problem for him.

The expression on Sandy’s face when they appeared in the light of the camp fire expressed his feelings. He sprang to his feet. ‘What’s all this?’

‘I found him.’

‘So I see. But why bring him here? Are you crazy? He’s one of Ducard’s men.’

‘Say he *was* one of Ducard’s men, but not from choice.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘He deserted to come over to us. That’s what he says and I believe him.’

‘Are you kidding!’

‘No. What else could I have done except bring him here?’

‘What the devil are we going to do with him?’

‘Frankly, I don’t know. I can set your mind at rest on one thing; he hasn’t seen anything that matters. I was waiting by the spot. He speaks fair English, so careful what you say about — *you know what*. He tells me his name’s Christmas.’

Jumbo guffawed. ‘How did you pick him up?’

Biggles explained how the situation had come about and gave Christmas’ version of what he had done, and why.

‘That’s all very fine,’ grumbled Sandy. ‘What if Ducard does come back and finds him here?’

Biggles shrugged. ‘He may not come.’

‘I bet he will.’

‘I’ve told Christmas that if that happens we shan’t be able to help him. He’ll have to bolt and take his luck. While he’s here he’d better keep out of sight as much as possible.’

Sandy sat down again. ‘Seems daft to me.’

‘How?’

‘Why the heck should we risk our lives for a man we don’t know and may turn out to be a spy?’

‘What do you suggest we do with him? Tell him to go back to Ducard? I doubt if he’d go. He knows what would happen to him if he did.’

‘Tell him to go home.’

‘Even if he has one, I doubt if he could find his way.’

‘That’s up to him. Why should it worry us? We’ve enough trouble on our plate as it is.’

Biggles spoke to the native. ‘Have you ever been here before?’

‘No sir.’

‘Could you find your way home?’

‘Not know, sir. I go home I get shot.’

‘Which side are you on, the government or the rebels?’

‘No side, sir. All the same to me. Everyone gets shot.’

Biggles looked at the others. ‘There’s a lot of truth in that.’ He lit one of I’Nobo’s cigarettes. ‘Well, chaps, that’s the position. I’ve told you how I feel about it, but you please yourselves what you do. I’m not in charge of the party.’

‘Aw! Let the poor devil stay,’ put in Jumbo. ‘I don’t see he can do any harm. If Ducard comes back it’s likely he’d find an excuse to bump us off, anyway. He’s been itching for a chance from the start.’

So there they were. Three white men, dirty, dishevelled, unshaven and looking very much the worse for wear; and one negro, standing awkwardly, first on one foot then on the other as he listened to his fate being discussed.

‘I don’t give a hoot either way,’ declared Sandy. ‘If he wants to stay with us that’s okay with me. He can collect wood for the fire if nothing else. All I know is I’m famished. Anybody mind if I have a cup of soup? It smells pretty good to me.’

‘Go ahead and pass the mug,’ answered Biggles. ‘I’ve got a sort of empty feeling inside, too.’ He looked at the native. ‘Have you got any food with you?’

‘Got some posho.’¹

‘You can’t have your pot back yet because we’re using it, but there’s some raw meat over there if you want it.’

Christmas fetched a strip of buffalo and laid it on the windward side of the fire. (This is the native idea of cooking when on *safari*. As soon as the meat is warmed through it is ‘done.’)

Sandy scooped a mug full of broth from the pot, blew on it to cool it and sipped it cautiously. ‘Pretty good,’ he announced. ‘I was ready for it.’ He handed the mug, still half full, to Jumbo. Then Biggles took a turn. This process was repeated until all the liquid was finished, when the meat was eaten with the fingers. Christmas chewed his still practically raw piece with evident satisfaction.

‘That’s a lot better,’ declared Sandy, when the pot was empty.

Everyone agreed. Biggles laid the remaining strips of buffalo meat on the dying embers of the fire, saying he thought it was the best place to keep them until the morning. They would be saved from the ravages of insects. ‘If I’Nobo comes over in the morning and drops us a parcel of food so well and good; if he doesn’t — well, we shall have to manage on buffalo.’

‘A day or two and I shall be ready to walk,’ said Jumbo. ‘Anyhow, with a

couple of sticks.'

'I still think I'Nobo will come,' went on Biggles. 'Something must have happened, or he'd have been back before now.'

Christmas suddenly sprang round, staring into the darkness.

'What is it?' asked Biggles quickly.

'I hear voices. Someone comes.'

'Get in the plane; stay there and keep still.'

Christmas did so with alacrity.

The others waited. Accoutrements jangled softly. Ducard marched up with two men.

'So it's you again,' observed Biggles evenly. 'I thought you were going.'

'I was, but I've lost one of my men,' stated Ducard.

'What's that got to do with us?'

'I thought he might have come here to you.'

'What gave you that idea?'

'He went to fetch wood and didn't come back.'

'Fell in a bog or got in the way of a hungry lion,' suggested Sandy.

'I thought he might have come this way.'

'Why should he come this way?' inquired Biggles. 'He means nothing to us.'

'Where else would he go?'

'No use asking me. You know this country better than I do. Take a look round. We don't want a thief hanging about here.'

'Did I'Nobo come back?'

'No.'

Ducard laughed unpleasantly. 'I told you.'

'Okay. So you were right. There's no need to make a song and dance about it.'

'What are you eating?'

'Boiled buffalo. We can't offer you any because we've just emptied the pot.'

'That's my buffalo,' claimed Ducard, savagely.

'How do you know?'

'I shot it. You'd no right to touch it.'

'As a trespasser in the Sudan you'd no right to shoot it.'

'Where is it?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'To feed my men.'

'You'd better shoot another, because you'll be a long time finding this one — if there's anything left of it after the vultures have finished.'

Ducard did not reply. For two or three minutes he stood contemplating the white men with cold hostility. Then: 'I will stay here,' he decided.

'Like hell you will,' growled Sandy.

Biggles held out a restraining hand towards him. 'Why here?' he asked

Ducard.

‘My man will come.’

‘And if he does?’

‘I will shoot him. That’s my way with deserters.’

Biggles got up. ‘Now you listen to me, Ducard,’ he said with ice in his voice. ‘You don’t like us and we don’t like you, so we know how we stand. You go somewhere else. There’s plenty of room. I don’t care where you go, but you’re not staying with us. That’s final. Push off.’

Ducard stared. His hand moved towards the revolver on his hip; but it stopped when he saw Sandy’s gun in Biggles’ hand.

‘Don’t try anything like that,’ warned Biggles.

Ducard breathed heavily. ‘You’ll be sorry for this,’ he spat.

‘So will you. Now get going.’

Ducard stood for a moment, glaring. Then, followed by his two men, he stalked off.

‘He’s a skunk,’ muttered Sandy.

‘I’d say a wolf; and a dangerous one, make no mistake about that,’ returned Biggles. ‘We’ve got rid of him for the moment, but take it from me he won’t go far. He was out for our blood from the start; now, after this, he’ll be ravaging. I don’t think he’ll come back tonight, but tomorrow, when he’s collected all his men, we shall have to keep our eyes open all the time. Now let’s get some sleep while things are quiet.’ He walked to the aircraft and climbed in.

He found Christmas squatting on the floor, teeth chattering and showing the whites of his eyes. ‘That was Ducard,’ he told him. ‘He’s looking for you. If he finds you he says he’s going to shoot you, so don’t show yourself. Stay in here.’

‘Y-y-yes, boss,’ chattered Christmas, fervently.

¹ This usually means a regulation ration of meal or rice served out to native bearers. For meat they rely on the gun when there is game about.

CHAPTER 15

DUCARD FORCES A SHOW-DOWN

Biggles, tired out, slept heavily.

He was awakened by Christmas shaking him. He sat up, still half dazed with sleep, and saw that it was daylight; broad daylight, with the sun already high. On the floor near him Sandy and Jumbo lay stretched out like dead men. With returning consciousness he became aware of a familiar sound, the reason why Christmas had awakened him. It was the drone of an aero engine, still some little distance away. He scrambled to his feet.

‘Have you been out?’ he asked the black boy quickly.

‘No, boss.’

‘You stay here.’

Without wasting time by stopping to awaken the others, Biggles jumped out of the plane, eyes searching the sky. It did not take him long to pick up the now easily recognizable outline of I’Nobo’s aircraft. Or one like it. It was flying at about two thousand feet with its tail cocked as it approached in a gentle glide towards what from the air must have been a conspicuous mark. The grounded Constellation.

It may have been the increasing engine noise — unless Christmas had awakened them — that brought Sandy and Jumbo to the open door of the machine. At all events, they appeared.

‘Who is it?’ shouted Sandy.

‘I’Nobo, I think. Give Jumbo a hand to get down.’

Sandy was still engaged in this, for with Jumbo having to be careful of his wounded leg it took a little time, when the single-seater arrived, now down to a hundred feet or so. Biggles waved. The pilot turned his machine to bring it in line with the open ground, then retarded the throttle and flew straight.

As the plane passed over the camp a bulky parcel hurtled down to bounce two or three times on the soft ground before it came to rest. A white object attached fluttered behind it. As with a wave of acknowledgment Biggles hurried to retrieve the parcel, the little plane rocked its wings and sped away in the direction from which it had come.

Biggles reached the bundle. It turned out to be a common sack. Before opening it, impelled by curiosity he picked up the white object fastened to it by a yard of string. It was a piece of paper. To be specific, an envelope. Written on the front in block capitals was one word. WAIT. He tore open the envelope. There was nothing inside.

He was still standing with it in his hand trying to work out the meaning of the brief order — apart from the literal and obvious one — when Sandy strode up, followed by Jumbo, hobbling.

‘What are you blinking at?’ inquired Sandy.

‘This.’ Biggles passed the envelope.

‘What is it?’

‘Read it for yourself.’

Sandy read the message. ‘What does it mean?’

‘Presumably what it says.’

‘Wait. Wait for what?’

Biggles shrugged. ‘How would I know? On the face of it, it can only mean we’re to stay here.’

‘It was I’Nobo?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Why didn’t he tell us more?’

‘Perhaps he couldn’t. It’s possible to speak English without being able to write it.’

‘I don’t get it. How can we do anything else except wait?’

‘I’Nobo may have thought that, now he’s brought us some grub, we might move off in an attempt to reach some sort of civilization.’

‘We shall have to do that, eventually, anyway. Why wait?’

‘I don’t know any more than you, but I’Nobo must have had a reason for telling us to stay here, or he wouldn’t have told us to. There’s a chance that a relief or rescue party is on its way here. He may have organized something of the sort. I imagine that would take time. Perhaps that’s why he didn’t come back yesterday. There must have been a reason for that. I’d bet my boots that when he left here yesterday he had every intention of coming straight back. But why waste time guessing? No doubt we shall know the answer in due course.’

‘Okay. So we wait. Let’s see what’s in the bag.’

The contents were tipped out on to the grass and examined with more than casual interest. It was evident that whoever had made up the parcel had given some thought to what would be most acceptable to men in their position.

There was a bag of rice, three packets of mixed biscuits, tea, sugar, a tin of condensed milk, some bars of chocolate, three small cans of corned beef with an opener, and two packets of a well-known brand of American cigarettes. These brought a smile to Biggles’ face. ‘I’Nobo must have raided a United Nations depot,’ he remarked. Cocking an eye on Sandy he added: ‘If I remember rightly you were in favour of shooting I’Nobo out of hand.’

‘He shot me down, didn’t he?’

‘Well, it all goes to show one should do nothing in too much of a hurry,’ returned Biggles tritely.

‘Don’t let’s stand here goofing at the stuff,’ broke in Jumbo. ‘Let’s get some of it inside us. I’ve got a lot of cracks and cavities to fill.’

‘You aren’t the only one,’ declared Sandy.

The foodstuffs were carried to the embers of the dead fire and laid out ready to hand.

‘How about a pot of tea?’ suggested Sandy.

‘I’m all for it,’ answered Biggles. ‘That means we shall need water and wood for the fire.’

‘I’ll fetch the water from where I got it yesterday,’ offered Sandy, picking up the pot. ‘Christmas might earn his keep by collecting some wood.’

Biggles hesitated. ‘I told him to keep out of sight in case Ducard came back. He might have seen I’Nobo fly over. And we don’t want Christmas to go near those tamarisks — he might see something.’

‘There’s plenty of wood kicking around without going there.’

‘All right. We’ll take a chance.’ Biggles beckoned to Christmas who, apparently unable to restrain his curiosity, was standing in the doorway of the Constellation.

‘Gather some firewood,’ he ordered, when the negro hurried up.

‘Yessir.’

‘Don’t go far away.’

‘No sir.’

Actually, there was no need to go far because, as Sandy had pointed out, there were plenty of dead sticks handy, the remains of bushes and shrubs that had occupied the ground before it had become waterlogged.

Sandy went off with the pot. The negro set about his task. Biggles stayed with Jumbo, talking and preparing the literally heaven-sent provisions, opening the packets and so on. Christmas returned with a bundle of kindling sticks and went off for more. Biggles arranged the fire and got it going. Sandy returned with the water and the pot was put on. Nothing more being necessary, a few minutes later saw a cheerful trio seated round the fire enjoying the first normal meal for days.

The fire was burning low. The water in the pot, intended for tea, had not boiled. ‘We shall need more wood,’ remarked Sandy. ‘Where’s Christmas? What’s he doing?’

‘He went off to collect more sticks,’ informed Biggles. ‘That was the last I saw of him. I was busy with the fire.’

Sandy stood up and looked around. ‘I can’t see him. Where the devil can he have got to?’

‘I hope he hasn’t gone into those tamarisks,’ Biggles said, frowning.

‘If he has, and finds those guns—’ began Sandy, and then broke off short.

‘Oh heck! Look what’s coming,’ he concluded in a voice heavy with disgust. They all looked.

Advancing from a belt of reeds from the far end of the open ground came Ducard, followed by his full force marching in single file.

‘Now we know why Christmas made himself scarce,’ said Biggles. ‘He must have seen them coming and did the disappearing act. We can’t blame him for that. No doubt he’ll find a place to hide from where he can watch the proceedings.’

‘He might have warned us,’ muttered Sandy.

‘What difference would it have made? To have exposed himself would

have been suicide.'

'Why do you reckon Ducard has come back?' put in Jumbo.

'Your guess is as good as mine. We shan't have long to wait for the answer. I suspected he wouldn't go far. He's still determined to pin something on us if he can find an excuse.'

'Well, one thing's certain; we can't fight that lot,' said Sandy, lugubriously.

'It would be stupid to try,' was Biggles' opinion.

As he had predicted, the answer to Jumbo's question was soon forthcoming. At a short distance Ducard halted his men and came forward.

'What are you doing with that food?' he demanded stiffly.

Biggles answered. 'We're eating it. I'd have thought that was obvious.'

'You'd no right to touch it.'

'And why not?'

'It was intended for me.'

'It was intended for us and you know it,' returned Biggles calmly. 'Had I'Nobo intended it for you he would have dropped it at your camp, not ours. You went off because you were sure he wasn't coming back. Well, he came, and dropped the parcel he promised us.'

'Don't touch any more of it.'

Not without difficulty Biggles kept a curb on his tongue.

'You don't need it. You have enough food to get home. You said so. We've had nothing to eat for days.'

'That's your fault for coming here.'

'It's your fault for keeping us here by shooting our friend without the slightest justification.' Biggles continued to munch a biscuit.

Ducard walked towards the Constellation.

'If you're looking for your deserter you won't find him in there, so don't waste your time,' said Biggles.

The information was ignored. Ducard got into the machine, presently to reappear and walk back. Biggles on his part, was thinking what a stroke of luck it was that Christmas had vanished.

'Where is he?' asked Ducard, obviously in an ugly mood.

'I haven't the slightest idea; and believe it or not, that's the truth.'

'I told you not to touch any more of that food,' said Ducard venomously, obviously still set on making trouble.

'I heard you, and I told you it was ours,' answered Biggles coolly.

He realized that Ducard was resolved to force the issue and that a show-down was imminent. The others evidently thought so, too, for they kept quiet. The trouble was, Biggles had only one defence; bluff; and in the present situation, with everything in Ducard's favour, it was obviously not going to work. With armed troops at his disposal, Ducard had them in his power, and he knew it. He could, if he so decided, murder them all; and if later he was questioned he would doubtless have an explanation ready. The irony of it was,

although he couldn't say so and expect to be believed, Biggles was where he was as a result of working on behalf of the government Ducard represented. In trying to stop the gun-runners he was now one of them.

'I'm going home,' stated Ducard.

'Goodbye,' returned Biggles, without looking up.

'Don't fool yourself,' Ducard said. 'You are coming with me.' His tone of voice left his hearers in no doubt that he meant what he said.

Biggles answered. 'I am not going with you and you know why. My friend here can't walk.'

'That's his bad luck. I don't care.'

'You should. You wounded him.'

Ducard gave an order to his men in their own language and they lined up in marching order.

Biggles played his last card. 'I've been told to stay here.'

Ducard laughed shortly and scornfully. 'Nobody's been here.'

'You're forgetting your superior officer, Lieutenant I'Nobo. Here's the order. He dropped it.' Biggles offered the envelope that carried the word 'Wait'. 'Read it.'

Ducard glanced at it. 'You wrote this yourself. Now get on your feet.'

Biggles did not move.

Ducard gave another order. His men lined up at a distance of ten yards from the fire. Another order and they loaded their rifles.

This was the show-down and Biggles knew it. Looking at Sandy he said: 'You go if you like. There's no reason for you to stay. I can look after Jumbo unless he really means to bump us off.'

'I'm staying,' returned Sandy briefly.

Biggles lit a cigarette.

There's no doubt that had there not been an interruption, the next minute would have seen the end of the affair; but at this desperate juncture there came a sound that turned all eyes to the sky. An aircraft was approaching. Before his eyes picked it up, Biggles of course had no other thought than I'Nobo. But when he saw it, one glance was sufficient. It was not the fighter. He was still staring, trying to identify the plane, when Sandy said: 'That's a *Courier*. Where could that have come from and what's it doing here, of all places?'

Biggles shook his head. 'Beats me. I've only ever seen one and that was in the dark — the one that took me from London to Noriovika. I can't imagine the Count coming here.'

'Neither can I,' Jumbo said. 'After what's happened, this is the last place on earth I'd expect to see him.'

'All the same, it's his kite,' declared Sandy. 'I know the registration.'

Nothing more was said for the moment, all eyes — including Ducard's — watching the plane as it circled three times, losing height. Then, with the engines ticking over, it straightened in line with the open ground.

'Whoever he is, it looks as if he's going to join us,' observed Biggles,

mightily relieved by this unexpected intervention.

Sandy brushed off the suggestion. 'He wouldn't be so crazy as to try to get down here!'

'Why not? I'Nobo landed here.'

'His machine was a single-seater.'

'With a war load it would be as heavy, if not heavier than a *Courier*, which struck me as a fairly light job unless loaded to capacity. Besides, the ground has been drying out fast since we've been here. He's landing, anyway,' concluded Biggles, as the *Courier* made a perfect three-point landing, and running on, came to rest. Biggles' eyes were on the wheels. They did not break through the hardening surface. The engines talked again and the plane taxied over to stop alongside the grounded Constellation. The cabin door was opened and a man looked out. A white man, dressed in tropical kit. He waved.

'Who can that be?' questioned Sandy. 'I don't know him.'

Jumbo chipped in with a chuckle. 'I don't give a hoot who he is he couldn't have arrived at a better moment for us.'

Biggles did not speak. He was still staring at the man, now dismounting, with an extraordinary expression on his face. There's an old saying, seeing is believing. There's another to the effect that one can't believe one's eyes. Thus it was with Biggles now, as a second man joined the first, now walking towards them. The pilot of the plane had got down and was looking closely at his undercarriage wheels.

Sandy looked at Biggles curiously. 'Do you know these chaps?'

Biggles answered in a voice he did not recognize as his own. 'Yes, I know them, but it isn't true. It couldn't be.'

'Who are they?'

'Two pals of mine from war-flying days, and later on my assistants at Scotland Yard. Their names are Algy Lacey and Ginger Hebblethwaite.'

'How come they're here — and in the Count's plane?'

Biggles shook his head. 'I haven't a clue, and I wouldn't try to guess. I have a fair ration of imagination, but this defeats it.'

Said Jumbo: 'What does it matter so long as they're here with a nice flying machine?'

Algy walked up, smiling. 'So here you are,' he observed cheerfully. 'Glad to see you.'

'You're not more glad to see us than we are to see you,' returned Biggles, warmly.

Algy glanced at Ducard and his men. 'Who are these chaps? What's going on? Is this a rescue party, or something?'

'Not exactly,' said Biggles dryly. 'As a matter of fact, when you dropped in he was just about to shoot us.'

Algy looked astonished. 'What the devil for?'

'Ask him.'

But Ducard had turned away, and at the head of his men was moving off.

CHAPTER 16

ALGY EXPLAINS

‘Never mind about him,’ Biggles said. ‘I have some questions to ask you. What are you doing in that aircraft and how did you know where I was? I imagine you were looking for me?’

‘Of course. Why else would I be here? And by the look of you, it’s time somebody found you. But don’t let me interrupt your meal. Carry on while I tell you.’ He sat down and Ginger sat beside him.

‘Let me introduce Sandy Grant and Jumbo Brady,’ said Biggles. ‘My companions in crime,’ he added, with a grin. ‘Now carry on. I’ve always had my doubts about miracles, but after this I shall have to think again. How did you work this one?’

‘There wasn’t anything miraculous about it. On the contrary, it was all perfectly simple. In the last conversation I had with you, on the phone, you said you’d taken a job with a charter concern run by a man named Stavropulos.’

‘Quite right. So I did.’

‘You said he was staying at the Grosvenor, where you were joining him to start work.’

‘Correct.’

‘You also said that if we didn’t hear from you inside a week, we could reckon something had gone wrong.’

‘Yes, I believe I did.’

‘Well, then. When the story hit the front pages of the newspapers I dashed along to the Air Com—’

‘Just a minute. What story?’

‘This gun-running racket, what else?’

‘Having been out of touch, I know nothing about that. What was the story?’

‘Apparently some smart newspaper reporter in the Congo picked up a whisper that two of the gun-running planes had been intercepted by a Congolese fighter and shot down. They had crashed in the Sudd. Naturally, he wired the story home to his paper. Was it true?’

‘More or less. Go on.’

‘Naturally, I reckoned you must have been in one of the planes. I went hot-foot to the Air Commodore and asked him what we ought to do about it. He’d read the papers. He said, what could we do? I asked if I could fly out in one of our machines to get the facts. He agreed. But remembering what you said about this Count fellow staying at the Grosvenor, taking Ginger with me as a witness, I nipped along to see if he was still there. I didn’t seriously expect to find him, supposing that if he was mixed up in this gun business, he’d have

seen the papers and bolted. But he was still there, looking pretty shaken, I can tell you. He'd read the papers, too.'

'What did you do?'

'What did I do? What do you think? And I didn't beat about the bush. I accused him of smuggling arms and getting fool pilots to do his dirty work.'

'What did he say to that?'

'He nearly had a fit. He agreed he owned an air freight company, but he swore he'd never handled a gun in his life.'

'Did you believe that?'

'No. And I told him so. But I said I didn't care about that at the moment. What I wanted to know was, were you in one of the planes alleged to have been shot down? He said he had only two aircraft in commission, both Constellations, so you must have been in one of them. A message had come in from one of his pilots that he had been shot down and was stuck in the Sudd. Through his manager he had ordered the second machine out to find the crash and bring the crew home if they were still alive.'

'Did he say what the machine was carrying?'

'Yes. Nothing but spare parts for agricultural machinery.'

'No guns?'

'Definitely nothing like that. The rescue machine, which it seemed was also shot down, would be flying empty. Well, the man sounded so genuine that I didn't know what to think. I said I intended flying out to get to the bottom of the business, whereupon he took the wind out of my sails by saying he'd already made arrangements to fly out to the Congo in his private plane to get the facts; to find out exactly what had happened. All his money was tied up in the two Constellations, and if the story was true he was going to claim compensation. That again struck me as queer.'

'You mean, he wouldn't be such a fool as to go near the Congo if his planes *were* carrying guns.'

'Not only that, if they were, how could he hope to get compensation?'

'Go on. This is very interesting.'

'He then took my breath away by inviting us to go with him. Why take separate planes? I rang up the Chief there and then asked him what I had better do. He said we might as well accept the Count's offer of a lift and try to get the whole business sorted out. So I told the Count okay, we'd go with him; and in a couple of hours we were on our way in this *Courier*, being flown by someone else for a change.'

'Did you call at an airfield in Greece?'

'Why should we?'

'Never mind. Are you telling us that the Count actually flew out here, to the Congo?'

'Yes.'

'Where is he?'

'Where we left him.'

‘Where’s that?’

‘Where we touched down. Masinda. The nearest Congo aerodrome to the Sudd. As soon as we landed he started creating, demanding an explanation and an inquiry. They had no right to interfere with his planes, and so on. The General in charge said he had been informed by a secret agent that the Constellations were carrying arms to the rebels. The Count swore that not one of his planes had ever carried war material. Let them prove that he had. Not much progress was being made when someone had the bright idea of sending for the pilot who had done the shooting. His unit was stationed on the aerodrome, so that didn’t take long. He came into the office and gave his version. He admitted to the shooting, and also that he had made a mistake, because he had searched the planes he had forced to land but could find no guns. He thought the information they had received must have been incorrect. He was a negro pilot named I’Nobo.’

Biggles nodded. ‘We know him. He’s been here.’

‘Well, he said he didn’t know how the story had leaked out to the press, but he wasn’t responsible. He thought the reporter had heard rumours and to make a sensational story had put his own construction on them. The argument went on all day. At the finish I’Nobo said that as one of the Constellations was stuck in the mud, and the crew had no food, he had promised, as he felt responsible, to drop some. Which I see he did.’

‘Yes. This is it. But how did *you* know where we were?’

‘I asked him to show us, and he said he would if we cared to follow him. That’s what happened. The Count didn’t come with us. We left him arguing with some officials — quite a crowd of them by this time. Anyhow, that explains why we’re here. What is hard to understand is how the story started that the Constellations were carrying war material. The Count can’t offer an explanation. He swears that the first machine was carrying only a consignment of farm machinery, and the second, sent out to find it, was flying empty.’

‘That’s the one I was in, flying co-pilot to Sandy here.’

‘You mean this one.’ Algy indicated the Constellation close by.

‘No. This was the first machine. Ours was shot down in flames when Canson, the pilot of this one, tried to do a bolt in it. I’ll tell you about that later. You’ll be interested to know that *this* one *was* carrying guns and ammunition.’

‘*What!*’ Algy looked aghast.

‘Don’t jump to conclusions. No one here knew it until the cases were unpacked, and from what you tell me it looks as if the Count didn’t know it, either. He’s telling the truth. In fact, everyone is telling what he believes to be the truth. At first I thought the Count was the bad boy, but I begin to see daylight.’

‘Are the guns still here?’

‘Not likely. As soon as we saw what we had on board we couldn’t get rid of the stuff fast enough. But never mind that. This, I’m pretty sure, is what has

been going on. The Count is running what he believes to be a genuine charter concern, based in Northern Greece for reasons which seem fair enough. It's cheap and it's central. Most of his consignments come by road from Yugoslavia, which is handy. The stuff is not unpacked and examined. But somebody knows very well what's in the cases. The Count's manager, who handles the stuff. A fellow named Miskoff. What his nationality is I don't know, but it's my guess that he's a communist agent, working for people who want trouble in the Congo. He's playing the double-spy, for we know for a fact that it was he who tipped off the Congolese government that the Constellations were running guns. He's getting money from both sides. Someone on the Greece-Yugoslav frontier must be in the racket, too, or the consignments of arms wouldn't get through. Some high official, probably.'

'The Count's going to be interested in this,' declared Ginger.

'Even so, he may find it difficult to prove his innocence. After all, the planes are his and he pays the pilots. He made two mistakes. The first was to trust his crooked manager. The second was failure to check the *bona fides* of the people who were sending him stuff for delivery. But it's easy to sit here and criticize when we know the facts.'

'What about these guns?' asked Algy anxiously. 'If they're found—'

'They won't be. They're not doing any mischief where they are. I suggest, for our own sakes, we keep our mouths shut about them. By the way, Algy, did you by any chance tell the Count, or the Congo officials, what I was *really* doing?'

'Of course not.'

Sandy looked interested. 'What do you mean — what you were really doing?'

Biggles smiled. 'You'll have to know sooner or later, so it might as well be now. As a matter of fact the British government was concerned about this gun-running because there had been a rumour that British equipment was being shipped. I was asked to find out exactly what was going on, who was supplying the guns, and how.'

Sandy sprang to his feet. 'So Canson was right!' he cried wrathfully. 'You double-crossing—'

Biggles raised a hand. 'Okay — okay. There's no need for you to fly off at the handle. I've managed to get the answers, and it's lucky for you and Jumbo that I have, because if I hadn't you would both have been up the creek without a paddle; if not now at some later date — thanks to Miskoff, who was selling you up the river and would no doubt have seen you shot without raising a finger. At least you know just how you stand, and so do I. If I'm called up to give evidence you'll be in the clear, because I'm satisfied you didn't know what you were doing and would testify to that. Had you been caught with a load of guns on board, you wouldn't have had a hope. Remember, *I* showed you what was in those cases and was responsible for the stuff being where it is now. Otherwise Ducard would have found it, and — well, I leave you to guess

the rest.'

'He's right, Sandy,' said Jumbo. 'Pipe down. This explains a lot of things I couldn't understand.' To Biggles he went on: 'What's the drill now?'

'I've finished my job, so I might as well go home. But before I can do that I shall have to have a word with the Count to put him wise about the way he's been duped.'

'I guess he'll be out of business now,' Sandy said.

'I don't see why. I shall speak for him, and he still has one machine operational.'

'Which one?'

'This one.' Biggles pointed at the Constellation. 'There's nothing wrong with it. The ground has been drying fast and I see no reason why we shouldn't get some tools at Masinda and dig her out. We could then fly her home.'

'Then for a start we all go to Masinda in the *Courier*?'

'That is obviously the thing to do. We shall have to take Christmas with us, unless he'd rather we left him here. He could be a witness of what happened here if Ducard started shooting his mouth. Where the devil has he got to?' Biggles stood up and shouted the man's name.

Christmas appeared nervously from a belt of rushes and joined them.

Biggles said: 'We are going to fly to Masinda. Do you want to come?'

Christmas looked doubtful.

'What's the matter?' asked Biggles.

'If I go Masinda p'raps meet Ducard. Then he have me shot.'

Algy chipped in. 'If we're coming back to salvage the Constellation, why not leave him here to help with the digging? There's some food left, so he won't starve. There are six of us without him, and Joe Blake, our pilot, won't like the idea of overloading his machine in a place like this.'

'That makes sense,' agreed Biggles.

'If it comes to that, why don't we stay here while the *Courier* fetches the spades? If we could get her clear we could fly her straight home without landing in the Congo. I'm thinking if we go to Masinda we might be chucked into jail.'

'For what?'

'Gun-running.'

'I don't think we need worry about that,' rejoined Biggles. 'Before it could be proved, the prosecution would have to produce the only evidence worth anything — the guns. They're not likely to find them if we keep our mouths shut. As far as I'm concerned they can stay where they are till they rot. Besides, if we went straight home it'd look as if we're afraid of something and running away. I need a bath and a shave, and I'm going to Masinda to have both. I shall also have a straight talk with the Count.'

'Okay, if that's how you want it.'

They all walked over to the *Courier* whose pilot had been stuffing brushwood under the wheels as a precaution against them sticking in the mire.

‘We’re ready,’ said Biggles.

‘Good. Then let’s get going.’

A few minutes later the *Courier* was in the air on its way to Masinda.

CHAPTER 17

HOW IT ENDED

The departure of the *Courier* from the Sudd was for all practical purposes the end of the arms racket as far as Biggles personally was concerned. He had done what he had set out to do, and apart from drafting a report on his return to London, he regarded his work as finished. But he felt he owed it to the Count to tell him what he knew, particularly as — let it be admitted — he had been mistaken in judging him to be the chief culprit.

The Count was still at Masinda, awaiting the verdict of the Court of Inquiry that had been set up to sort out the legal aspect of what was now a complicated tangle of fact and conjecture. His claim for compensation would probably depend on the decision of the Court.

After a quick bath and shave Biggles took him to a seat in the shade of a tree in the grounds of a bungalow that had been allocated to United Nations observers for their use. There had been no question of them being taken into custody, but they were asked to stand by to give evidence if it was required.

‘This is a serious matter and I shall have to talk seriously about it,’ began Biggles. ‘It will be to your advantage to answer my questions truthfully.’

‘I am not in the habit of telling lies,’ stated the Count, coldly.

‘Good. First of all, tell me this. Had you, at any time, any reason whatsoever for thinking your planes might be transporting guns or other military equipment?’

‘My planes have never carried anything of the sort, and I am prepared to swear that under oath,’ declared the Count, indignantly.

‘I’m sorry to have to tell you that you are wrong.’

‘How dare you say that?’

‘I say it because I know. The cargo in the plane flown by Canson and Brady for delivery in the Congo consisted of automatic rifles and cartridges for them.’

The Count stared. ‘How do you know?’

‘I saw them. If you don’t believe me ask Sandy Grant. He saw them. So did Canson. They helped me to hide them. In fairness to them I must say I’m quite sure they didn’t know what was in the cases they had on board until they were opened.’

The Count had changed colour. ‘If this is true I’m a ruined man,’ he said in a broken voice.

‘I wouldn’t say that — yet. Don’t worry. We shall say nothing about the guns. Nor will you, if you’re wise. I’m satisfied that you knew nothing about them, or I wouldn’t be telling you this. I can swear, and so can Grant, that there was nothing in the plane we were flying. What happened to Canson was his own fault. He tried to make off in our machine, leaving us, as he thought,

to face the music. A Congolese pilot, thinking he was trying to escape, which in fact he was, shot him down.'

'I still can't believe this,' said the Count, helplessly. 'How could it possibly happen?'

'It could happen, and did happen, because you left too much to your traffic manager, Miskoff. He is, I suspect, a communist agent, although what country he represents I don't know. He also takes money, I have reason to think, from the Congo authorities as an informer. It was he who told them your planes were carrying guns. That was why they were ordered down, and when they failed to comply, were shot down.'

'The scoundrel. I was told the consignment consisted of agricultural equipment.'

'I believe that. But when you were absent it was an easy matter for Miskoff to pass the cases for anything he cared to name. He must have had accomplices at the frontier, of course. You were too trusting.'

'I suppose so. But in business one has to trust somebody.' The Count looked at Biggles with a puzzled expression. 'How was it you were able to find out about this?'

'It was my business to find out.'

'Your business?'

'You'll have to know eventually what that is, so I might as well tell you now. I'm a Scotland Yard detective—'

'But I thought you'd—'

'I know, resigned. No. That was a ruse to get taken on by the people in the arms racket. The British Government was deeply concerned, as they had every reason to be as it was being whispered that some of the guns were of British manufacture, by what was going on. I was given the assignment of finding out. And, as you will realize when you have got over the shock, it may be a good thing for you that I succeeded. I'm not going to apologize for deceiving you; these things have to happen; but I will say I'm sorry for suspecting you of a nasty practice. That was when I first took service in your company.'

The Count took a deep breath. 'What shall I do now?'

'Stay here and see the matter through. Tomorrow I hope to return to the grounded Constellation and dig it out of the mud. There's nothing wrong with it as far as I know. If you agree, taking Grant and Brady with me, if they're not required to give evidence, I'll fly it back to Noriovik. If that works out you'll still have one plane to carry on with.'

'What shall I do about Miskoff?'

'If you're asking my opinion I'd say you have two courses open to you. You can kick him out, and let it go at that; or you can say nothing, reckoning that given enough rope he will hang himself. Both the British and Greek governments will have to be given the facts about what has been going on. Together they should be able to set a trap to rope in not only Miskoff but his

confederates. He's not alone in this.'

'As you have been so frank with me, for which I am truly grateful, I shall take whichever course you recommend,' the Count said. 'Now let us have a drink. I feel I need one.'

It only remains to be said that the affair ended very much as Biggles had predicted. No charges were made against the Count or his pilots, no doubt because there was no evidence to warrant a prosecution. Had it been otherwise, Biggles would have felt obliged to say who he was and why he was there; but as the necessity did not arise, he thought it better to say nothing. The Count told him that he proposed taking no action against Miskoff until Biggles had made his report, when the British and Greek governments could between them take such steps as they might resolve.

The day following Biggles' revelation to the Count, the *Courier* flew the members of the Air Police, and Sandy, to the stranded Constellation. Jumbo, who was still lame, remained with the Count to fly home with him later. Blake, the pilot of the *Courier*, stood by until the big machine had been cleared, a task which, now the mud that held her was almost dry, presented no great difficulty. The *Courier* then returned to Masinda without them.

There was one trivial incident about this that should be mentioned. It was expected that Christmas would be there, waiting to help, as had been arranged. Instead, he was not to be found. The only sign of him was the half-burnt rags of his uniform. All the food had gone. Biggles pointed out there was no mystery about it. It was obvious that the negro, with a fair supply of food at his disposal, had decided to make his own way home, rather than go to Masinda where he might run into Ducard, with fatal results as a result of his desertion. In the circumstances, to fade away was probably the best thing he could have done. He was not seen again.

Biggles, with Algy, Ginger and Sandy on board, flew the Constellation to Noriovika. Miskoff was not there, so what might have been an embarrassing situation did not occur. After a little farewell celebration with Sandy, the Air Police party made its way by road to Central Airport, Athens, and from there home by the regular air service.

Biggles lost no time in reporting to Air Commodore Raymond, and that for him was the end of the affair. What subsequently happened he learned through official channels, for to prevent an international argument the details were never made public. The Greek government, having been informed by the British Foreign Office what had been going on, made its own arrangements to deal with the situation. A trap was set, and the next time an attempt was made to smuggle arms across the northern frontier it was sprung. Several arrests were made, Miskoff among them. What happened to him Biggles never heard. Not being particularly interested, never having met the man, he didn't trouble to find out. All he knew was, he vanished from aviation.

Count Stavropoulos was awarded compensation for the loss of his Constellation. He still operates his air charter business with an agency in

London. He was allowed to retain his base at Noriovika on the understanding that he was more careful in future. The same pilots are still with him, as Biggles learned when one day he ran into Sandy at the Royal Aero Club.

So, taking one thing with another, the Case of the Gun-Runners ended with less fuss than at one period of the affair looked inevitable.

One final curious note might be mentioned; curious because it provides an illustration of how differently things can work out from those anticipated. The Air Commodore received a letter from the Count thanking him for the service the Air Police had rendered and putting his aerodrome and organization at their disposal should they ever be required.

So on this occasion Biggles, who had set out to break a gang of dangerous crooks, ended up by making some new friends.

THE END